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IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

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HURST & BLACKETT, 13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

IN THE WEST COUNTRIE

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF

“QUEENIE,” “ORANGE LILY,” “A JEWEL OF A GIRL,”
“MY LOVE, SHE’S BUT A LASSIE,”
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO THE EARL OF DUFFERIN:

In grateful remembrance of many kind words of encouragement from the author of 'Letters from High Latitudes' to a younger writer from the same county.

MAY CROMMELIN.

October, 1883.

Gen. n. v. Ray 30 July 51 Biddgen = 30.

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IN THE WEST COUNTRY.

CHAPTER I.

OUR home was lovely !

I verily believe in all the length and breadth of England you could not find one other, of its own size, to match with the charms of that dearest old place.

One knows old-world tales of love in a cottage ; which homely nest, of course, is always a bower of bliss, hidden in creepers. Our house was like three or four still more delightful cottages joined into one old Saxon homestead ; each just touching its brother at

angles, and staring at a different quarter of pleasant earth and sky ; but all bound together in love by the roses that almost smothered the walls, peeped in at the windows, hung from the carved barge-boards, and kissed the old home red or white with blossoms, from spring to autumn.

Not only roses, but every pleasant plant that creeps on walls ; as many as only Solomon,—or our old gardener,—knew.

And as to gables ! why, each side of the house seemed to have at least eight of them, some built with timber cross-beams in the masonry, others with wooden carvings everywhere, and stone niches for little patron saints ; while all had steep tiled roofs, with corbie-steps, crow-stones, glittering vanes, and the funniest twisted chimneys in the world. Windows here, there, everywhere ; big ones

with cool embrasures and deep seats, little ones in the most unlikely nooks; windows latticed, or paned with bottle-stump glass. But this last was no modern imitation. All was of ancient date at Stoke, excepting—well, perhaps ourselves.

Stoke was simply the name of our home. (In ignorance, I once used to wonder why there were so many Stokes in England, till told it meant merely ‘place’.) Stoke-Bracy *used* to be its proper designation; but that was when the former owners lived there. My mother thought Stoke was simpler, and perhaps had fewer associations.

Indoors, there was a real old dining-hall, dating from Saxon days, with no story betwixt the guests’ board and the lofty roof, but a louvre overhead to let out the fumes of smoke and good cheer. The rest of the house was

two-storied only ; which explains why it spread over so much ground.

In the entrance-saloon, as it might be more properly termed than hall, seeing it had always been a sitting-room, there were four splendid, full-length portraits let into the panelling, by Lely, Kneller, Reynolds, and Lawrence, of ancestors who—were not ours !

The fact is, to confess quickly, we were only Browns—Browns of no place, till the last spendthrift old Bracy squire was obliged to sell Stoke. Browns without an *e* ; Browns in trade ; nothing more ! None of us were even born at Stoke, though Rose was a mere baby when we came.

My earliest recollections are of living in our grub stage, in a genteel semi-detached villa outside the town where my father made

his fortune ; of our perambulators being aired in a small provincial Zoo ; and of our mother's cool and haughty remarks, caught up un-awares by our little pitcher-like ears, that ' if her old equals in the county did not choose to call upon her, she for her part did not choose to be called upon by the ladies of the town.' She was perfectly happy, she would observe in her beautifully-trained voice, without either society. For she was a Beaumanoir, daughter of Sir Reginald Beaumanoir, the last baronet of his impoverished family ; and our mother's marriage was supposed to have been a judicious alliance of fortune with family, though attachment had somehow crept in.

Nevertheless, though so avowedly content, she never rested till my father first bought a county place, and then retired from the greater part of his business.

What happiness was ours when we first heard the news, that we were henceforth to live among woods and pastures! How we ‘babbled of green fields’! Oh, the pictures we surreptitiously drew on our slates when the governess wasn’t looking—of ourselves perched on strange animals, beneath which was generally written, ‘This is a Pony’; of ourselves (recognizable as human by having outstretched hands with five fingers each as long as our bodies) standing five in a row before the ideal dwelling my father had described—which we portrayed as about half the height of the aforesaid five, all windows and chimneys, with a volcano cloud of smoke eddying away in the distance.

When we did see Stoke it surpassed, however, our wildest imaginings.

Shall I ever forget the close of our long

journey there ; when, after wearisome, dusty highways, we passed into the shade of the great woods that for three miles round lovingly sheltered this gem of a home from the rough outside world ? The evening breeze again seems to fan my brow as we all sat up, refreshed and full of curiosity, and gazed at the great trees, the bracken coverts, the open down-like patches where the rabbits fed by scores ; getting sudden glimpses as we wound along a wooded height of a charming, mysterious valley below.

Then—when the house came in sight—we all gave a cry !

The sun was sinking, and each window seemed redly illumined to ‘meet and greet’ us on our first crossing the threshold of what was thenceforth ‘home’. The walls were covered with a drooping mantle of flowers.

Flowers, flowers bloomed everywhere—around the dwelling in exquisitely trim borders, in parterres, in old-fashioned vases round little pebbled courts filling nooks and angles, in the centre whereof small fountains played, or old sun-dials stretched shadow-fingers. And the whole quaint homestead, its flowers, gables, flashing weather-cocks, all seemed to be peeping over the edge of a smoothly-shaven grassy slope, that descended with treacherous suddenness and depth into a bosky valley. There a little lake reflected woods around its further three sides, where beech-branches swept the water, while the swans, as

‘ On still St. Mary’s lake,’
floated,

‘ Double, swan and shadow.’

And in the heart of these woods that trended lake-wards from the high ground whereon we

stood, were hid baby ravines and gorgelets. Down these trickled little brooklets under the thick foliage overhead, singing only to fairy glens, tall forested with ferns such as human eye or hand had hardly ever seen or disturbed in their damp, cool haunts.

Next morning a slight incident happened that always associated itself afterwards with my first impressions of Stoke.

Bob and I had agreed to rise early and explore our new kingdom, while the rest of the dull world was still asleep. Bob came next to me in the family, callow, awkward, and constantly in disgrace with our parents and teachers, but dearest and most delightful of brothers. His head was long ; his straight hair, always ill-cut and ill-parted, was just the colour of a canary's wing ; his eyes, though beaming with high spirits, were of

the weakest light-blue ; his hands and feet were much too big, and his joints loose. Ugly was he—?

“ No matter for that,” King Henrye cryd ;

“ I love him the better therefore.”’

There was no use in asking Alice, our elder sister, to come too. She loved pranks, but not early rising or hurried dressing, thank you ; besides, she slept near the governess.

Our eldest brother Beaumanoir was at school. Beau we all called him when our mother was out of earshot. Rose was too much of a baby.

So we two rose and stole out by ourselves.

I remember, like yesterday, the dewy freshness of the whole sweet face of earth around us that new morning. How the birds sang their matin praises in all the bushes more

clearly, and the flowers smelt sweeter, than ever before or after, and the trees seemed taller, and swayed their branches in more stately harmony.

‘Let’s come down to that little flower-garden that we found last night,’ said Bob as if he was a first discoverer of the spot.

We agreed, as usual. The garden was a delightful spot of primness, though just beyond its stone boundary wall nature reasserted her easy wilder sway in meadows and woodland. Its little paths were paved carefully in chequers of black and white pebbles; the box edges were clipped straight and stiff like rows of military vegetation; yew-trees stood about shaped like chess-pieces among the Queen Anne flower-beds. On the one side peeps could be had through outside shrubbery of the lake, that still lay in shadow,

but for one bright gleam at the far side, where rays from the east just flashed on it a wakening summons. And, looking upwards behind us a little way, the old house showed its most charming side of all.

‘Isn’t it a little Paradise, Bob!’ I exclaimed, after we had dived down a pleached alley of jessamine and emerged among the yew pawns to gaze round, hard breathing in our haste and full of enchantment. ‘How I should love to be queen here!’ (*i. e.* be lord over my brethren in this acre and a half.) ‘There can’t be any other home in the wide world half so delightful as this.’

‘*There cannot!*’ said a strange voice beside us, with a sound more like a sudden sob of pain wrung out unawares than a sigh.

We both started.

Close beside us, hidden hitherto by the

yews, stood a young lad, much older than Bob, older even than Beau. His arms were folded, as if we had surprised him in a meditative survey of Stoke and its grounds. One quick, hesitating look at us, one glance all round at house, woods, and valley ; then he darted towards a corner of the ivy-covered garden-wall, and springing up, seized a strong tree-branch that hung just overhead along the wall, and swung himself into invisibility, as far as we were concerned, on the other side.

‘Stop thief!’ cried Bob, instantly giving chase.

‘Stop, Bob!’ cried I, instantly full of fears for my valorous brother, but running after him—with a very weak heart and a very great wish to run the other way.

Bob sprang at the wall, trying likewise, he

too, to vault it, but fell back with injured, bleeding hands, a fringe of cruel glass in the masonry having been hidden by the ivy. No matter! still gallant, he jumped up at the branches above, but caught no doubt the wrong ones, for one only swung him a little upwards, and another fairly broke under his weight. After this second fall, Bob sat still on the ground looking rueful.

‘Come away, come away,’ I urged, in a tone of beseeching comfort; ‘he’s gone *long* ago.’

‘If we could only have caught him!’ sighed my young brother, slowly rising, and not understanding apparently my feminine reasons for leaving the spot. ‘He may have been a poacher, you know, or some sort of a desperate robber.’

‘Oh, *do* come back to the house,’ I entreated, trembling.

Bob, however, would only do this after a careful examination of the mysterious visitor's means of disappearance. By standing on inverted flower-pots we discovered that the wall was everywhere protected by a deep dry ditch on the far side, excepting at this one especial spot. And, presently, we marked the very bough the trespasser had used, though it was too high for Bob, jump as he might.

‘I say! he must have known his way about most awfully well,’ observed Bob, putting his head on one side with a sagaciously mysterious air.

Then a six-o’clock farm-bell rang to work (for we had been out since five), and the figure of the gardener was seen approaching.

‘Let us go and tell him about it,’ I suggested. ‘You know papa says he is such an honest man.’

On our father's return from one of his previous visits to prepare Stoke for our arrival, we had heard him praising this man Verity to our mother, as a pattern of rude fidelity. Born and bred in Stoke, and having hardly ever been out of its parish, Joe Verity had since boyhood attached himself so devotedly to the Bracys, that he curtly told my father he could never bear to see a new family there, so he would go 'when the place went.'

'Now, you know, that's what I call a fine fellow, so I begged him to remain,' cried my father, in whom staid business traditions had never damped a warm natural enthusiasm. 'You don't see too much of that spirit now. I offered to raise the poor fellow's wages, for the Bracys could not afford to give him much, you know. But no!—no use, till at last

young Bracy, the grandson, himself advised him to stay on, and that settled the matter. The poor man had some wild notion, it seems, of being able to go with his young master. He'll make us a good servant, that you may depend on,' ended my father.

'I hope he will make us a good *gardener*,' said my mother, in her gentle high-bred voice, never so carried away by feeling as to lose sight of the main object, like my father, although she was a Beaumanoir born, and he only a business Brown.

Verity was fastening creepers on the wall when we went up to him eagerly with our story. He listened stolidly enough till we described the tree-branch, but at that looked round hastily, and made a few steps towards the spot. Then he stopped himself, and returning to his work, asked us gruffly, with

an averted head, 'What was he like? was he common-looking?'

'No, no,' we cried; and hastened to describe the strange youth, whose figure now I can hardly recall.

Joe Verity only nodded, holding some nails and a bunch of list in his mouth.

'But was he a robber? tell us! was he a thief?' cried Bob, impatient of this unmoved man's manner of receiving our news.

Verity turned round to us—a squarely-built, self-reliant man, strong in body as in his iron will, with a broad brow in which were two wrinkles furrowed by honest endeavour to do constantly the best that was in him.

'It was no robber,' he just answered, taking the nails out of his mouth to speak, and then putting them in again, while he

looked at us with a doubtful expression in his deep-set gray eyes, that we detected. 'He'll not come back again; so you need trouble your heads no more about him.'

But the gardener did not then quite understand children's ways, nor our curiosity. We slipped away, grumbling to each other at the romance of our adventure being stifled.

'Well, we'll tell nurse about it; and papa when we see him at lunch-time,' we murmured, sure of fellow-feeling in those quarters.

Verity looked after us, scratching his head, while the two wrinkles in his forehead deepened extraordinarily.

Then he called out to me:

'Hi! — little Missy! Miss Brown, I suppose.'

'Yes,' I said, coming back with a child's

willingness, though thinking him a rude man to go on with his work and call me to come to him. ‘But I’m not Miss Brown; that is my elder sister. I’m only Miss Pleasance.’

‘That’s a queer name, anyhow,’ remarked Verity, as if loth to say yet why he had called me back.

‘Well—but what do you want?’ I now questioned with some dignity, feeling Bob’s chin planted on my left shoulder, while his face, I knew, was alive with expectation.

‘See,’ said Verity gravely. ‘I’ve been taking crown counsel, as the lawyers might say’ (and he gave a last enquiring rub at his crisply black head). ‘I’m not forbidding you to tell your father or your nurse; that’s right enough, but still—I think him you saw this morning would rather not have it spoke

about. He had as good a right here as yourselves : ay ! and far better unto—yesterday.’ Here the gardener’s face softened wonderfully, and he turned slowly to fasten up a rose-branch, continuing : ‘ If so be as he came early this morning to take a last look at the old place, he didn’t think to disturb any of ye ; and you, Miss, being older than your brother, have sense enough to know a sore heart shuns gossip.’

‘ Was it—the grandson of old Squire Bracy ? ’ I asked in an awe-struck whisper. ‘ We won’t say a word about it.’

Our oracle just gave a sort of satisfied nod at us, and replied : ‘ It might ha’ been—or one of the family, leastwise. I did not see him, mind ye.’

We went away quite proud of the secret, as of our own future staunchness in keeping

it; and that morning was thenceforth enveloped in a halo of romance to us.

To our credit be it said, I only told Rose after a year or so; and Bob only told Beau. When the latter came back from school, he treated the adventure loftily as one of our silly childish marvels, and soon forgot it. For fear of more ridicule, we neither of us ever told Alice, who always laughed at us in an elderly and irritating way.

CHAPTER II.

THE next event I most clearly remember in our family history happened some years later.

Bob must have been at Harrow a year or two, I think; and both he and Beau had come home for the Easter holidays.

It was a chilly, sunny Sunday morning. ‘Pleasance! Pleasance! Are you ready for church?’ they were calling in the house; and I can recall so well creeping slowly down the shallow steps of dark-oak stairs, holding heavily by the balusters with a swimming sensation in my head. ‘Why, child, what is

the matter with you ?' asked my mother, who was standing below in a ray of sunshine that came through a latticed window.

She somehow impressed me that moment as looking so calm, elegant, pretty ; so different in everything from myself. Her dress of that respectably old, if not venerable, date is before my mind's eye now.

A pink cambric made in three great flounces all round ; her taper waist drawn still tighter by a sash tied in long loops in front ; her sleeves puffed wide at the shoulder, but skin-fitting at the wrists ; her fair hair brought down in shining bands below her ears ; and a tiny gathered bonnet almost falling back off her pretty head. 'Are you ill ?' she repeated with light marvelling, as if such an occurrence was most unlikely in her family. 'I don't know, mother,' replied that miserable

being Me ; ‘but I do feel rather sick. Please, may I stay at home from church ?’

‘*Sick!* what an expression!’ said my mother, with a gesture of slight disgust ; but she gave the required permission after critically looking at me. I slipped away into the library because it was least frequented, and, feeling rather ashamed of myself, hid in a window-seat behind the curtains. A door near was open into the morning-room, and my mother’s voice reached me, saying confidentially ! ‘Pleasance is unwell. I don’t know how it is, that child is such a goose.’

‘My dear, you ought to think your

“Every goose a swan,
And every lass a queen,”’

laughingly remonstrated my father in his clearest and cheeriest of strong voices coming

from a little body. 'Can any of us help feeling out of sorts at times?'

'Well, somehow, if there is any infection going she is sure to catch it,' repeated my mother with accusation still in her tone. 'Certainly, neither she nor Bob are Beau-manoirs in that or anything else.'

'Well, my dear, they are good Browns, and take after my family in names and natures, so I must see after this sick gosling,' returned my father, good-humouredly as ever; and then I heard his voice calling me, evidently full of solicitude.

Slipping out by the other door, I found him standing below the stairs just where my mother had been. Trim, tidy, he was a very little man, who always seemed trying to stand on his heels with his chest much expanded in order to look bigger. He had

the ruddiest English face, and the largest loving heart in the world. No ; he certainly was not handsome, but there never was, or will be, his like to me again.

After receiving his caresses, and advice to go out and have some fresh air, I watched them all packing into the long family waggonette.

There was Beau, our pride, our Etonian, carefully smoothing his tall hat with a fine-airs expression on his handsome young face. There was Alice, laughing at my woebegone looks, as usual ; always laughing, always lovely !

Certainly, it was very odd that she and Beaumanoir should have been given by our mother her family's names while in their cradles, and that they dutifully followed her family's characteristics.

My name, I afterwards learnt, had been a matter of slight dispute, since it was most pre-eminently a Brown one. ‘There always had been a Pleasance in his family,’ my father, however, firmly insisted though so easy-going, ‘and he wished there always might be.’

It must have cost my mother a little effort to repress a slight curl of her lip at the idea of the Brown family having ‘always’ existed, or indeed having any clear reason to give for their being (except on the plea that trade is a human want), till the best of them was united to a Beaumanoir. But, to do her justice, she never snubbed my father on this point; never even tried to assert authority over him openly like so many wives. Still she managed to get her own way with him in almost everything, for he adored her. She always made him and all of us

feel that she had condescended greatly in her marriage,—but she had loved him, deep down in her heart, we could be sure, though he was a Brown, and though she was so gracefully indifferent and superior in her ways. Rose, our youngest, nodded at me from the carriage, like a sympathetic China mandarin. She was also said by our mother to show Beaumanoir promise, and was expected to be a beauty—though this was less certain.

But, why did Bob stand with his head drooped on one side ; and why did he limp back dismally to the house as they drove off ? What could be—— ?

‘ Come along ; let us go off for a ramble somewhere,’ exclaimed that young man cheerfully, bursting into my retreat.

‘ Why, Bob, what kept *you* from church ? ’

Bob screwed up his features deprecatingly,

and dropped his lip ; which made him look very ugly, as I promptly told him.

‘ My toe is all smashed. I got it caught in a gate yesterday when Beau was riding the colt, and I fought them both for fun.’

‘ Oh, Bob !—you came in here not a bit lame.’

Staying away from church, without being really ill, was rare indeed with us.

‘ But it is really sore though,’ assured Bob, with a quizzical screw of pain to all his features, that were as flexible as those of any clown. ‘ Besides, you would have been all alone, poor old girl. Come !—I’ll hobble with a stick as far as the lake, and we’ll search for wild-ducks’ nests along the edge.’

He soon persuaded me, though I felt very unwell ; and down by the lake we hunted through reed-beds and rushes. The only

thing that kept Bob from pulling off his boots and stockings to wade, was, I believe, that his toe was *better* than it should be.

At last, we tried up a little back water all fringed with alders and willows. Suddenly there was a startling whirr and rush of wings from under our very noses, and with a great ‘Quack — quack,’ disturbing the Sunday quiet of the woods, out flew a mallard and his mate from the rushes. ‘Hooroo!’ cried Bob, and plunged along the bank through boughs and brambles joyfully. ‘Here’s the nest just below me,—and eggs! I can see them! It’s down there close by the water.’

See the eggs, yes! but he could not reach them.

We did not mean to rob the poor wild duck, but who could resist inspection of such

a nest? So Bob crept down to the edge cautiously, and then—there being little foothold—caught firmly by an alder branch above him with both hands. He,

‘Thought it was a trusty tree,
But syne it bowed and then it brak.’—

Even so!—

A crack—a souse!—and down went poor Bob into the oozy stream, still clinging as he went to that faithless branch. To my eternal shame, be it recorded, as he rose all streaming and spluttering, I laughed till my sides so ached that, being weak, I had to sit down and hold by another alder. How ridiculously one does laugh while still in short frocks! But the first thing Bob did was, to stand up in the muddy water and laugh too. To end the matter, we retreated homewards, hoping devoutly to reach unseen

the cottage of our former nurse who had now been taken to wife by Joe Verity. But as ill-luck would have it, back came the church-party and caught us—Bob watering the carriage-drive as he went from all his garments, and every lank hair of his head.

That afternoon I grew worse, and the old doctor was sent for; ‘black dose’ being whispered by my sinking heart, and read in my brothers’ and sisters’ pitying looks. But when our village medicine-man left, towards evening, my good father—finding Master Bob alone outside the porch, looking dejected under my mother’s silent scorn of the existence of such a goose—put his hand on his shoulder, saying kindly :

‘Look here, old fellow ! That toe of yours was rather shammed this morning. Come—you know I don’t like you boys to miss

church. Still, considering the lesson you got, we'll say no more about it.'

Bob looked and felt desperately contrite; but then seeing my father smile, thought he might as well smile too.

'What about Pleasance?' he asked with interest; 'how is she?'

'Oh, she's not at all badly,' said father with an intentionally cheerful air. 'It doesn't signify, they say, only she's got the measles.'

'NO,' said Bob, awestruck. 'How many of them?'

Poor Bob soon might ask the same question about himself, for, faithful to me in all things, he was ill too by morning. And then with a whistle from Beau at the news, and a shiver of Alice's pretty shoulders, and a frightened laugh from Rosie, my mother announced further, that these uninfected ones

were straight to be hurried off on a visit to our grand-aunt, Miss Beaumanoir, who lived ten miles away in a tumbledown dower-house styled by its owner The Barn.

CHAPTER III.

OUR grand-aunt, it may here be remarked, was an oddity. ‘In fact,’ as Joe Verity thus once delivered himself, ‘she’s the greatest cur’osity, out of being bottled in spirits in a museum, ever *I* saw ; but ye could never mistake her for anything *but* a lady once she came to speak to ye.’

This last was quite true ; but, as may be shown later, at a distance foolish persons might be forgiven for erring.

From our childhood, in our distant town-house, we had been taught to venerate this relative ; the last remaining representative of

the Beaumanoirs, as our mother carefully instructed us. Indeed, it was chiefly because our Aunt Bee lived in the dower-house of her ancestors, and that Stoke was in the former shire of the Beaumanoir family (although their property had been on the other side of the country), that my mother was bent on moving to our new home.

We children were wildly eager to see this Beaumanoir grand-aunt of whom we were so proud; and of whom my mother was fond of telling us a rather romantic story.

Miss Beaumanoir had been passionately devoted to her only brother, Sir Reginald, our maternal grandfather. When he was so embarrassed with money difficulties that the estate was in danger of being sold, she had placed her own fortune, twenty thousand

pounds, in his hands—given it generously, utterly. In return, her brother had settled an old dower-house and demesne on her—the Barn where she still lived. But her sacrifice was in vain. A fire broke out in this very dower-house where they were then staying together—Sir Reginald, who was ill, died next day of exposure. The money, being in notes, had no doubt perished in the flames, for no trace of it was ever found. And the Beaumanoir estate went to the hammer.

Before coming to Stoke we pictured her vividly to each other as a snowy-haired but beautiful old lady, who would look ‘just stepped out of a picture’; always dressed in black velvet, and with a sad sweet face, as befitted the last of her name. Then she would have an erect carriage; and perhaps carry a snuffbox, or a big fan, or a mysterious minia-

ture concealed round her neck. Opinions on these latter points were divided.

The first time we beheld the real presence of our grand-aunt, however, was on this wise.

We were all assembled for breakfast one morning, at half-past nine o'clock, and prayers in the hall had just been ended, when a ring was heard at the entrance-door.

‘Who can be there at this hour?’ said my mother.

‘It’s a beggar-woman, I think,’ announced Beau, glancing at the window.

‘Tell them to send her away immediately. Coming to the front door!—what will these tramps do next, I wonder?’

Beau disliked leaving his plate; but Bob had tumbled at once off his chair, lustily

shouting as he half-opened the door, ‘Mamma says you’re to send away that beg——’

The last syllable died on his lips as he was smartly pushed aside by a strange little figure of a woman, who was answering to an expostulating footman, ‘Don’t mind me, my good man : I’ll announce myself;—I’m Miss Beaumanoir.’

Our venerated grand-aunt ! Every knife and fork was dropped as we all gazed, petrified. She certainly was a grotesque sight.

Standing at the door an instant as if to survey us all, we saw a dried little woman, who, like the Wandering Jew, might be imagined almost any age, her skin was so like parchment—while yet her eyes had a life and sharpness, and her small person an air of activity, quite uncanny to behold. As to

her garments, they seemed all to be from a pawnshop, and none of them matching. A black straw bonnet adorned with artificial flowers was slipping off her head; a green veil; a blue parasol; an old black bombazeen dress, very short, below which appeared mysteriously the flounce of another thin black material trailing on the ground; while a tippet of the same transparent texture airily draped her shoulders, and was edged with narrow white crochet lace, through which meandered a penny red silk ribbon, giving colour to the outline. Such was Miss Beaumanoir's dress. She also wore bright violet gloves, so cheap that they seemed inclined to split at every seam, and the solitary button of each was tugged to bursting; notwithstanding which their owner was jauntily flourishing a little black bag.

My mother, who had only seen her aunt years ago, was inwardly horror-stricken, as we guessed, but to do her justice recovered bravely. ‘Dear Aunt Bee—how *do* you do? What a surprise!—but I am so delighted,’ she gasped, advancing with much bravery to kiss her relation’s cheek.

‘And so this is you, Ada; I remember you as a little girl—yes; you’re just what I expected,’ our grand-aunt coolly vouchsafed, taking our graceful mother by both hands and absolutely examining her at arms’-length. Then turning to father she added: ‘But is this your goodman? I wanted to see him especially. I’ve heard about you—oh, God bless you, I know by your face you and I will get on together,’—whereupon Aunt Bee threw her arms about his neck and gave him as his share an embrace with such gusto that, for

the first time in our lives, we saw our father almost foolish and speechless ; though Miss Beaumanoir kept kindly clapping his shoulder to enable him to recover.

‘How late you fine people are!’ she went on. ‘Why, I had my breakfast before six, and was off. Still, I think I’ll join you all now, for I feel rather peckish.’ (Peckish—a word mother had strictly forbidden the boys to utter in her presence, as vulgar.)

We each thought how she must be wishing to lift her white hands in horror ; but we hardly dared look up.

‘Oh, do sit down ! But how did you come ; we heard no carriage ?’ faintly asked mother.

‘Carriage, my dear ! I walked on my own two feet. Why, it’s only ten miles here from the Barn ; and, if I’d driven, you’d have had

to give stable-room to my old pony longer than you'd care perhaps.'

'Not at all. As long as ever you liked, and the longer the better,' cried father, gallantly. 'But I hope that means you intend to stay yourself with us, anyhow.'

'Exactly so. Oh, you and I will get on together like a house on fire, I see,' replied Miss Bee, nodding at him with highly pleased becks and smiles. 'Yes, I've come to stay two or three days.'

'That's right,' heartily went on father. 'And where's your luggage? It's to follow, of course; or can I send for it anywhere?'

'Luggage! Here's all my luggage—this little hand-bag. Why, I've gone to Russia and back with just this. What more do you want?—a tooth-brush and a hair-brush and a night—'

‘But your dresses!’ absolutely ejaculated my mother, cutting short with real dismay her aunt’s list of travelling necessities.

‘My dresses!’ I am sorry to relate it: but our grand-aunt literally jumped up and down on the floor while displaying her bombazeen with both hands. ‘*They’re all on me, my dears.* This is my day-gown, as you see; and here’s my dinner one underneath’ (lifting the top skirt to show the thin mystery below); ‘and I just slipped my Sunday silk under that again, for fear you might happen to have a garden party or something smart’ (picking up the dinner-skirt to reveal a third layer of garments, the last one being so far from smart, and a yard deep in dust after sweeping the Queen’s highway for ten miles, that we young ones forgot our manners, and fairly screamed with laughter).

‘Oh, you brats!—they’re all laughing at me. I can tell you my gown was good enough for the Duchess of Westshire where I was staying last week, so it may just do for you.’

We all knew Aunt Bee visited the finest of folk on the most intimate of terms, so were every one respectably silent.

‘However,’ she added, contemplating the undermost skirt again—‘I own, it is dusty, but no matter. I’ll just take a run round some of the meadows with you boys, and that will clean it. I don’t like girls half as well—never did; and Miss Brown there is too fine for me, I’m afraid. She’s the very picture of yourself, Ada, my dear. And this next little witch with the mouse-coloured hair’ (meaning me) ‘looks as if she used her big eyes more than her tongue; you’re a chrysalis still, child; no one could say how

you'll turn out. There's an ugly division and a handsome division in the family, I see ; I always belonged to the uglies myself, but I like looking at the beauties.'

From which last words, it will be seen our grand-aunt Bee had already descried we were a mixed family of swans and geese. My mother, Alice, and Beau, of course, were all swans ; father, poor Bob, and myself belonged hopelessly to the mean class. Little Rose was the only doubtful member of the family ; since she joined to most exquisite colouring the funniest little turn-up nose in the world, with an upper lip so short and impudent it always showed her snowy little teeth.

As to myself, I felt ill-proportioned in mind and body ; with more of limb and hair than I could dispose of gracefully, but too little colour and self-confidence. I was shy, brooding,

with vague ambitions of soul beginning to stir, yet only common-place gifts to justify them,—*growing*, in fact, and unformed. My only comfort was, that my father always called me his ‘ugly duckling.’

CHAPTER IV.

I WAS very ill, indeed, that time. My mother nursed me herself with the most painstaking care, and I well remember my great surprise at waking up once to find her crying over me. It seemed, in her, such an impossibility.

Yet as soon as I began to recover, she became again as composed, almost cool in her manner, as ever; so that I lay in respectful quiet and monotonous semi-darkness till my father would appear like a sunbeam always flickering between our two sick-rooms, bringing with him a fresh breeze of outside, as it

were—cheery words, little items of news from the garden, or farmyard, or woods, and easy laughter.

One day when Bob and I had both met down-stairs for the first time, curiously comparing our white faces and respective green goggles, our parents entered with that pleased possessive air which means unmistakably good news.

‘Here, invalids ! here’s good luck for you,’ cried father, flourishing a letter ; ‘my old friend, Mrs. Gladman, invites you both down to Dartmoor for change of air. I declare I wish I was going too ; it would make me feel a boy again.’

We piped for joy, in still weak delight. ‘There is *nobody* I like so much as Mrs. Gladman,’ I exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

‘Except Jack Gladman,’ corrected Bob

with equal ardour. Jack was Mrs. Gladman's only son, and she was a widow.

Our mother looked at us rather critically during this outburst of ecstasy. Mrs. Gladman was the only one among her husband's old friends whom she ever welcomed to our home. My father considered Mrs. Gladman to have the chief place among his old friends ; my mother gave her perhaps the lowest place among *her* friends ; and yet, almost against her will, respected, and felt attached to, that good soul and warmest of hearts.

It was a lovely spring evening when we first saw Dartmoor's rampart of hills rising before us, moated by the valleys at its base. Perhaps it was from having been cooped in darkened rooms so long ; perhaps from fatigue of a long drive through Devonshire lanes, that hid all view entirely except for a sudden

tantalising peep through occasional gates—but, certainly, when we at last mounted a long hill and then descending the further side looked down into a small valley, seeing great oak-woods clothing the hill-sides, and a trout stream brawling out of a rocky little gorge to wind through cowslip meadows, whilst midst most tall trees clustered round a brown mass of homely, half-seen buildings,—we seemed entering a moorland Paradise.

‘That’s Wheatfield Farm yonder, and Mrs. Gladman hur be coming to the gate,’ announced our driver, pointing with the butt of his whip.

But we had guessed it already.

That delightful, long, old farmhouse could belong to none other than she; with its trim garden in front, and narrow paved walks. Its red-tiled or thatched roofs overhung to the left the fresh green lane down which we

came. To right, the great farm orchard stretched all pink and white up the hill on the other side, till it was folded in by the noble oak-woods that crowned the high ground on this side of the valley. Yes ! these delightful possessions rightly belonged to that best of women. Besides, there was she herself standing at the wooden gate, with a broad smile of welcome on her broad kindly face ; with the selfsame brown hair worn so thick and low on her forehead, we had sometimes irreverently declared it looked just like a beautiful wig.

And, a little further down, was Jack Gladman ; riding up the lane to meet us on his white pony, in a wide straw hat, rough tweed suit, and gaiters. He was very little older than Beau, who somewhat despised his clodhopper upbringing ; yet here, on his own

ground, he looked quite a young squire and a man already. Any further observations were stifled in Mrs. Gladman's large embrace, as she took us both first literally to her heart and then led us in to her hearth. To us, Wheatfield Farm seemed then a most delectable abode, with no troublesome carpets and fine furniture, but clean dark floors that we could romp over,—sweetness, if economy, everywhere. It was a very old house, and had been in the possession of the Gladman family for generations. Once it had been thought quite a handsome gentleman's dwelling, before city luxury spread into the country; but it had stood still like its farm-loving owners, and now was surpassed by far newer houses, whose more pretentious families looked down on the Gladmans. Still as it was later improved, and may thus be here-

after described, I will only say that we then found it a home of early rising, plain food, plenty, and health.

What a happy idle life we led in that old Devonshire farmhouse ! We scampered into the moor for miles on ponies ; and climbed all the tors near and far ; seeing always fresh ranges of hill beyond hill overstepping each other, all viewed by us as so many fortresses of nature to be stormed by our eager selves and taken.

Or else Bob would follow for the livelong day close on Jack Gladman's heels, watching the latter oversee his farm-men from six in the fresh morning till six again at restful eve. Or Jack would be breaking in his young colts, himself delighting in the risk and trouble. Or he might have to be whole afternoons in the oak-woods, seeing about barking the trees.

Meanwhile, I was being initiated in dairy mysteries by Mrs. Gladman ; and soon knew how to make butter Devonshire fashion, and scald cream, to my own satisfaction—and, at worst, her amusement as well as mine.

However real all this work must have been to the widow with a large farm and household to manage, and Jack too young to take the full cares of life on his own shoulders, to us it was like playing at being in Arcadia. It seemed such a sweet, simple life ; a pastoral idyll. As such, it might almost have faded from my memory by now, like a pleasant dream, but for one acquaintance—whose appearance in the narrow circle of my then young life deserves recalling.

‘There is to be an otter-hunt up the river to-morrow. Pole is bringing over his hounds, mother. And, I say, can you get up a

breakfast in time for any of the fellows?’ cried Jack Gladman one evening, bursting hot and breathless into the parlour, where Mrs. Gladman was darning some very old and fine table-linen with her own fingers, since none of the maids would have taken such pride and pains in the task.

‘Why, we just *must*, dear,’ replied his mother, lifting her placid face with such a willing smile and air of fond motherly pride in her boy, that no wonder he came to her for help and advice on every occasion.

‘That’s right. You’re the most useful woman in the world,’ exclaimed Jack, catching her round the waist and giving her a resounding kiss, which embrace made Bob and me somehow feel uncomfortable, yet admiring. Why could we never treat our mother in a familiar way! ‘And I say, old Fulke will come in

for it, too—isn't that luck. He's just come down by Exeter way for a week's holiday; got a lift in William Collins's spring-cart. Dear old Fulke! ain't I just glad he's come down.'

'Did you not tell him to come and see me this evening, foolish boy?'

'I did—and he said at first, of course, he was coming; but then he thought this first evening he would not leave his poor mother. . . . I told him that Pleasance and Bob were here,' went on Jack with a constrained look at us, 'and, you see, he doesn't much care to meet strangers.'

'Ah, yes—I can understand that. Poor Fulke!'

Mother and son exchanged a meaning look; which, as I was staring in their direction, I saw, and naturally wondered at. What had we done, or this Mr. Fulke done,

that he should dislike the sight of fellow human beings ; especially such harmless ones as Bob and myself ? Oh, no doubt he was a misanthrope ; on which I disliked him, beforehand, for disliking us.

‘ Who is Mr. Fulke ? ’ I asked. And Mrs. Gladman answered, rather hesitatingly :

‘ He’s a great friend of ours, my dear, and he’s a clerk in a bank.’ A bank clerk, and come in Collins the grocer’s spring-cart ! I did not think much of this friend.

‘ Now, Pleasance,’ cried Jack, laying a heavy hand boisterously on either of my shoulders, ‘ are you game to be up by six, and down at Chagford bridge ; or are you too fine a young lady ? The hounds will most likely go up Holy Street to Gidleigh Park ; and then we may be off upon the moor ; or heaven knows where ! ’

‘Oh, I’ll go. It will be glorious! But, Jack, *do* take away those great hands of yours. I’m not fine, and I never was, but I don’t like to be teased,’ was my answer; half-ecstatic, half-exasperated; trying to wriggle away from the expected, endearing horse-play to which Jack in good-fellowship loved to treat me.

‘Yes, Jack; you really should not tease Pleasance so; she will soon be quite a young lady,’ added his mother, who always protected me. ‘You always remind me of a mastiff dog gambolling round a grey kitten. A great big fellow like you should be more gentle.’

Why she said a grey kitten more than a white or any other she did not add; probably as less pretty, I surmised resignedly. But there was no doubt when looking at Mrs. Gladman’s honest eyes beaming upon her boy,

that, to her, he was as big as any Saul and as fair of face as a David. Nevertheless, in sober truth he had now stopped growing at five feet eleven ; had the healthiest dumpling visage in which any young Englishman could show red and white ; twinkling eyes ; a commonplace nose ; white teeth ; and the downy dawn of what would no doubt become respectable mutton-chop whiskers, like his father's before him, in due course of time.

CHAPTER V.

Ven. ‘My friend Piscator, you have kept time with my thoughts, for the sun is just rising, and I myself just now come to this place, and the dogs have just now put down an otter. Look down at the bottom of the hill there in that meadow, checquered with waterlilies and ladysmocks : there you may see what work they make : look ! look ! you may see all busy. Men and dogs, dogs and men, all busy.’—IZAAK WALTON’S *Compleat Angler*.

BOB and I hardly slept that night, we were so fearful of being late for the otter hunt. Before four in the grey morning, I heard a tapping at my door, and springing out of bed in terror—though it seemed as if I had only just fallen asleep—let in a head and an

owlsh face, in which concern and sleep were mingling.

‘I’m sure,’ said Bob, ‘*they’ve forgotten to call us!*’

It seemed his watch had been over wound ; or else had stopped of pure malice ; which it often did, he ruefully explained, for by day it required being shaken pretty often to keep it going.

In spite of fears, however, when Jack brought his dog-cart to the gate we were ready. We had gulped down breakfast in the kitchen, where Mrs. Gladman, herself as neatly dressed and unflurried as if the hour was quite usual, was up, helping her mainstay, Mary Munch, to frizzle bacon and boil coffee.

Away we sped in the grey twilight.

‘I hope we’re not late. Luckily there’s a long hill to go down,’ said young Gladman,

lightly touching up his mare with the whip ; and downhill we spun at a pace that made me giddy looking ahead, and that none but a Devonshire-bred animal would take as a matter of course.

Through a sleeping village, down a narrow lane. ‘There they are,’ cried Jack, pointing to a group gathered on the bridge over the brown Teign. ‘There is my friend Fulke ; and that’s Pole, the master, just going to put his hounds into the water. We’re in the nick of time.’

‘Hooroo!’ jubileed Bob lustily ; brandishing a long leaping-pole behind us, to the danger of our heads, as we drew up.

‘Be quiet, you March hare,’ called out Jack ; and several of the men, to my surprise, laughed out, and hailed Bob with ‘Hollo, young Brown!’ and called him ‘March hare,’

too. It was my home name for him, picked up by John, and now evidently widespread. How Bob had already got to know them, since coming to Wheatfield, was a mystery. But there *never* was such a boy for making friends !

There was no time to ask him, for already the horn had sounded and the hounds taken eagerly to the water, swimming and wading up the clear brown stream that ran between the dewy meadows, all gold-spangled with marsh marigolds.

There seemed about twelve or fourteen gentlemen in the hunt, for they wore the same costume as Jack : navy-blue knickerbocker suits, red or blue stockings, and striped caps. Most of them carried leaping-poles, as did two large-waisted, laughing cousins of Jack's among the several girls of the party. Of course, there was the

usual following of truant urchins and idlers attracted from their farm or village work—but these indeed were few and of small account.

‘Are you going to look after us, Jack?’ called out his cousins in healthy, large voices.

‘Not I! You are much better able to take care of yourselves. Keep close behind me, Pleasance,’ was the only answer they got; as, vaulting a stile, Jack went up the first meadow at a sling-trot, just looking back with one satisfied eye, occasionally, to make sure I was at his heels.

Some few of the more ardent men and boys had taken to the water, and were splashing at a rattling pace up-stream; among them Bob, who hardly set foot on dry ground that day. We had gone across all the meadows

without pausing to take breath. Over walls, through gaps, I scrambled, almost always without accepting, Jack's help, so that he soon scarcely seemed to think it necessary to heed me. My cheeks were glowing; my hair, that had been tidily coiled up that morning to keep it out of my way, was flying in a veil behind; and I hardly knew how I felt except that it was delicious to run, yet grateful to stop just a few seconds!—when we found ourselves somehow among woods, and that the hounds were at fault, while two sharp little terriers were being sent up a suspicious covered drain, to ask if the otter which we had found but not *seen* might be there.

We had paused in Holy Street glen; and how lovely it was! The river twisted and hurried foaming round the grey rocks in its bed, while the rising sun played on it through

the tall trees overhead, and the opposite oak-wood was knee-deep in masses of blue-bells shading away into violet. We sat down to rest and breathe a moment on some of the many-lichened, mossy boulders around, the supposed traces of the Druids' holy way that still gives its name to the glen. Then came a fresh sound of the horn ; on and on again ; still down by the river's edge, through copses that snipped our faces, stumbling among rocks, out into young wheat-fields, into fresh difficulties, jumping, climbing, and racing at a pace to which that of the meadows had been mere amusement.

Now we were at Lee Bridge, the meeting of the waters, where the North Teign came down from Gidleigh. But we took the South stream on the left ; and here we met trees, ferny coverts, rocks, and obstacles that piled

and tangled themselves in our path ever more and more. Undaunted, still we scrambled upwards and onwards.

Some now lagged behind, seeing no more of that day's run. Our numbers were visibly smaller as we streamed in twos or threes through the bushes. Most were more silent of laugh and chaff, and settled to earnest work now ; all but Bob, who, streaming with water from his cap down (for he had fallen head foremost several times), seemed to have jokes and laughter to the end. For me, my heart was beating so hard it seemed ready to burst ; slight mists came before my eyes ; yet, while Bob ran on, so would I.

A horrible wall suddenly seemed to rise in the wood before us. Young Gladman and most of the men splashed at once up to their knees in the river which met it, so got past,

but my courage failed at sight of the deep water. Oh! why had Jack forsaken me? The last of all, with sore fingers, I somehow clambered to the top of the wall, and beheld a tall stranger waiting below.

‘Jump!’ he cried, stretching up his arms, into which I jumped, and was carefully set on my feet. ‘Take breath now—’ he ejaculated; but on a determined shake of my head he caught my hand and ran a few yards; dragging me. Then there was a sudden check. The otter had been headed, and the hounds were foiled.

A rest! Oh, how sweet was rest! My craven heart almost wished they might never find that scent again.

The woods were in their freshest beauty around us, but little had we recked of that. I looked round to thank the unknown;

but he had vanished in the group of otter-hunters.

A whimper or two, the horn sounds as gaily as ever, and they are back again; but more slowly.

This time I was aware of a pair of strong arms hoisting me up to that hated wall, and the same voice as before ordered—‘Stay there.’ Foolish pride urged self-dependence; so calling back, ‘No, thank you! I don’t want help,’ I jumped unaided, fell, and bruising my foot on a stone, hobbled on with sobbing breath, never looking behind me. Past the meeting rivers, and up the other Teign; over more level ground; through more woods; past exquisite bits of river scenery, titanic boulders flung in the bed of the stream; into a wooded rocky gorge . . . down again a bit, up again! . . .

At last we got to an almost impossible part. My foot was so painful, that, seeing some of the men spring across stream on what seemed easy stepping-stones, I followed. One spring to a round stone wet with spray, then with slipping feet to another and another, and then I found myself on a giant flat boulder exactly amid-stream, and just where the water was deepest.

Luckless Pleasance! I had mistaken the stones and was left, hindmost of all, and utterly helpless.

The shouts of the hunt came each second fainter down the gorge; no sound answered my calls upon Jack and Bob. In a few minutes I was alone.

Now this may not seem at first hearing so bad. Nevertheless, on looking down, the dark pool on the further side might be six foot

deep, as I fearfully judged—having some experience—and I could not swim. There had been a spate very lately, and the water rushed so eagerly, like a brown, living thing round those treacherous stepping-stones, that they misliked me more and more. Besides—from my rock I *could not* jump back to them !

No matter, Bob would miss me, and surely Jack. Till then I would nurse my wounded foot ; be at rest—a glad rest, drawing my breath still hard—and look around me ; the scene was so exquisite.

What if I never saw the tip of the tail of that poor otter we had been so cruelly chasing ? My enthusiasm had vanished ; the sun had risen so high among the trees, it seemed to me the hour must be getting quite late, though it was barely nine o'clock ; and, to

confess the truth, besides utter fatigue there was a curious feeling creeping over me that might mean hunger.

With my brown hair falling like a veil about me, and the sunlight striking down upon my red petticoat and fawn-coloured short skirt and jacket, I began to dream of myself as an Undine, with the sentimentalism of my age. An Undine in strong, laced-up boots, and a cricketing-cap lent me by Jack crowning my 'wealth of tresses.' But I clasped my hands round my knees and unconsciously glowered around quite appropriately ; wishing for the help that neither woods nor stones could give.

On either side, the trees rose in a green wall, clothing the sides of the gorge. There was only a narrow space left for the revivifying blue sunlight to pierce between, and sparkle

on the clear brown water that hurried and twisted and foamed like an element of life round the white boulders piled in chaos in the narrow bed of the stream. Here midmost I was perched, glad as any midge to feel the sun—a single human speck in that solitude. Here and there in the clear shallows I could see the gravel shining like rare pebbles. The woods around just bursting into leaf were like a brown network all flecked, spangled, and, as it were, dropping with green.

And still I was alone. The birds were trilling up the gorge in scattered song; and oh! if on the bank now what skirtfuls I could have picked of red-campion, delicate lady's-smocks, and dearest yellow primroses; there were beds of trembling wood anemones, too, and white satin star-flowers in profusion.

‘Spring, the sweet spring, is the year’s pleasant king ;
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring.’

Flash ! flash ! there jumped the trout in the water, showing their silver sides. A wagtail seemed to laugh at me, flirting its saucy tail, as verily it might, for here sat Undine still, and yet there was no knight—— !

Suddenly a human voice called, ‘What is the matter?’ and there was a man in the correct otter-hunt costume standing on the bank ; a gentleman most certainly, if not a knight.

Then, seeing what *was* the matter, without more ado he jumped into the water, which soon reached above his knees.

CHAPTER VI.

‘ We twa hae paidlit i’ the burn.’

I WAS last left still seated a prisoner on my great rock of unfeeling granite in the middle of the Teign. But my unknown deliverer was wading towards me.

He seemed a man of few words ; for all he said in answer to my shamefaced explanations as to how I came in such plight, was to bid me hold tightly round his neck. Then taking me up by one arm, he steadied himself by his leaping-pole. But noticing me wince as he placed me safe on the bank, he asked with a different tone of interest :

‘Are you hurt, too? I was afraid of that, when you would jump down that big wall by yourself.’

‘So it was you?’ I exclaimed with eager recognition; ‘I thought it was, at every step you took in the water, but I was not sure.’

‘Yes; it was I that gave you a hand, if that is what you mean?’ he said, more *dryly* (to make a mild joke!) than the dripping state of his nether person seemed to me to warrant. ‘I thought you had hurt yourself; and that was how I came to notice that you were not with us when we got out on the moor there,’ and he nodded up the ravine.

‘But did you come back on purpose to look for me? *How* kind of you to stop in the middle of the hunt!’ I exclaimed shyly, but in a voice overflowing with gratitude, whilst I looked even more thanks. And now that I

had really courage to look at him, he was really a very handsome man,—old, quite old, and not a boy like Jack.

‘Kind to prefer helping a suffering human being to making a poor otter suffer!’ he said with a short laugh, that raised a short brown moustache showing even better teeth than Jack’s.

‘But my brother—a boy in the water—Bob—did he not think of me?’ I shyly asked with injured sisterly feeling; while secretly trying to give my loose hair and little red and blue cap a more prim and *comme-il-faut* appearance.

‘If you mean a fair young fellow that Jack Gladman and the others called the March hare, he seemed so perfectly mad after the otter you ought to forgive him,’ said my new friend, smiling as if despite himself. ‘I am

an older hand at it; but Jack might have looked after you himself rather more. His mother will scold him for it, I should think.'

'What! do you know Mrs. Gladman too?' (joyfully).

'*Know her!* She and Wheatfield Farm and Jack are among my oldest and dearest friends and memories; I should rather think I do know her—well. But we are wasting time, and how are you to get back to her? I had better carry you to the nearest cottage; and then we'll see what's next best.'

Against this I protested, and did walk bravely a few yards, hurting myself at every step, till my protector suddenly said in a kind scolding voice:

'Now, don't be such a silly child; ' and so caught me up and bore me through the trees to a cottage near, whether I would or no.

Secretly I would, for the pain had been sharp. Besides, evidently there was no use remonstrating with a man who used so few words and always had his own way. One felt he would be master; it was in his face and in his voice, or so I thought, being still almost a child in my ideas. If I was right it was woman's instinct, for he had not a frowning brow, or stern deep-set eyes, or a lip that betrayed unfaltering resolution, or anything especially determined in his appearance; and Bob said afterwards, on being privately told my opinion, that it was all bosh! and he—my deliverer—was the most good-natured fellow in the world, though very likely he wouldn't stand nonsense.

Anyway, at the cottage he made me unlace my boot myself, as from modesty I strictly forbade his doing so. And then he borrowed

a rough big pony fresh from the harrow, its head being still adorned with blinkers and rope-reins.

‘Now, can you lend me something by way of a saddle for the young lady?’ went on the voice of my friend outside. Meanwhile I sat in the cottage kitchen on a settle, and alternately marvelled at my new acquaintance, and at the queer German scriptural prints on the walls. Some Autolycus must have found them good pedlar’s ware, for every cottage parlour round the country-side was hideous with them.

‘Oh, my dear crature—’ answered the cottage goodwife in easy Devonshire tones, without seeming to disturb herself in the least, ‘what would us do with a saddle? Hur’ll have to sit on hur’ (this last meaning the mare) ‘barebacked just.’

‘Come now, look here; I’ve unharnessed the pony myself, and you’ve had no trouble, so get me a clean sack like a good soul,—do now.’

‘Bless us, a sack! Johnny, Jemmy, Susan, where is the potato sack to, anyway?’

‘Don’t trouble yourselves. *I’ve* got one;’ and returning for me, my friend in need coolly routed out a new sack from behind the meal-barrel. He first put it, and then myself triumphantly atop of the vulgar steed; seized the reins himself. So—walking close beside me lest I should slip—along the lanes we jogged back to Wheatfield Farm, a strange pair. In after days the memory of our homeward conversation all faded away. Only I knew that, short as my companion’s remarks were, they were so full of kindly pity and purpose that soon I found myself, to my

own surprise, talking to him as if he had been an old friend of the family, or some elder cousin, of whom I was not in the least afraid.

It was a long way back ; and once or twice I checked myself, ashamed of my ease and familiarity. But then my friend had been so kind all morning, and was taking such good care of me on the pony. Besides, he knew the Gladmans well, so that he must be ‘nice.’ And not daring to ask his name, I began to spin all sorts of romantic surmises about him in my brain, till it was indeed a tangle.

Coming round the bend of the lane, we saw Mrs. Gladman busy tidying her garden under the encircling shade of a straw hat the size of a cart-wheel ; and Mary Munch—her stout, wholesome cook, dairy-woman, and

goodness knows what not besides!—absolutely standing idle, with a sun-bonnet tilted over her eyes, and her bare arms akimbo.

‘Why, yonder’s Missy and Mr. Fulke,’ she called out loudly. ‘Whatever has happened to hur?’

‘What! Mr. Fulke!—I am so glad to have you back again among us. But . . . Pleasance, child, *is* anything the matter?’ cried Mrs. Gladman in her turn, hurrying to open the white gate for us. Then, as we both explained my light accident, she caressed me, and said, reassured, ‘Well, I am glad you were with Mr. Fulke, at all events. You could not be in better hands.’

They had put me down on a garden seat carefully, and only as the name was repeated did it flash through my mind with

bitter disappointment that my good-looking stranger was—only the bank clerk.

‘Stay and have some brexfass now, Mr. Fulke,’ urged Mary Munch familiarly, as I slowly recovered from my mental shock; ‘I was looking up the lane for Master Jack and the rest, thinking you’d all be as hungry as hunters sure-ly.’

‘And she can do nothing, she is so distressed at her grand breakfast being in there uneaten,’ laughed Mrs. Gladman.

‘Can’t—thank you. My poor mother, you know,’ lowering his voice. ‘This is just the time she would like me to help her outside, to sit in the garden.’

‘Ah, well! but then you will come this evening to tea, at least?’

To which last the visitor nodded thanks and went off, lifting his hat to me before I

could summon any fit form of words in which to express my gratitude to him.

By-and-by, after my foot had been dressed with lily-leaves, and I was settled comfortably on the wooden window-seat in the parlour, having had some of Mary Munch's 'fine brexfass,' Mrs. Gladman said, with a cordial smile, as if sure of my ready sympathy:

'Come now, let us talk about Mr. Fulke. Don't you think him very handsome, Pleasance? He always reminds me of a young sun-god.'

I secretly smiled in my imagined superiority; for my good old friend had a still romantic heart within her stout body, as I had discovered.

'Well; I can't say that I exactly thought him a Baldur the Beautiful, though I am sure he is a—very nice young man,' I

flippantly answered, tossing my head that was humble enough at home as the family goose, but here, being cockered by unusual caresses, Jack's big boyish devotion, and his mother's fond admiration, had become quite impudent.

What a conceited young hussy my dear motherly hostess must have thought me ! But perhaps she knew the tiresome airs of little bread-and-butter misses, which seem a general phase of their existence, since she always bore mine with an angel's patience. Looking at her, by-and-by, I saw by her silence she was hurt. She had left the sunny garden and her pleasant morning's work outside to sit in the dull brown parlour with a lame chit of a girl, and in return was almost snubbed about her favourite Mr. Fulke.

Feeling something of this, in secret

penitence, I hazarded the remark—‘Isn’t it rather a pity, as Mr. Fulke is so pleasant, that he should be only a bank clerk?’ My idea of banks was hitherto that of our small county town one, between the baker’s and the haberdasher’s shops.

Mrs. Gladman stopped knitting Jack’s heather hose, and stared at me in amazement.

‘Bless my heart, child! Why, the bank he is in is one of the oldest in England or *anywhere*; and requires the highest interest to get into. Then he may become a junior partner, and think what a fortune he would retire upon some day. I only wish my boy had such a chance! . . . But there,—it is not given to every one to have such a strong, self-denying nature, and give up all the field-sports and pleasant society that a young man is so fond of. Perhaps Jack will be happier

on his little patrimony, like his fathers before him, though nowadays it is no such great inheritance.'

Knowing that the Gladmans' estate, though retaining its old-fashioned name of farm, ranked respectably among those of the first squires around, whilst the family themselves were acknowledged to be of older origin than most—I was doubly surprised in turn.

'And has Mr. Fulke been accustomed then to field-sports and good society?' I pursued, still half-incredulous; pulling the mantle of my mother's manner about me, and my voice betraying the fact.

'Don't make a mistake, Pleasance. He is certainly reduced to poverty, through no fault of his; but he can boast of a far older and better family than either you or I.'

'Then is it not a pity he did not choose

one of the professions instead ?' said the foolish spirit possessing my childish mind, as I unconsciously mimicked my mother. 'The army or the Church.'

'Your father was not the worse man for being in trade, I think,' returned Mrs. Gladman, with such dry significance that the ashamed blood rushed to my cheeks, and quick salt tears to my eyes.

Of course our father was *always* perfect, as every one knew. But now he had become quite a country gentleman ; and though he was ready enough to talk of his past life, our mother deftly turned the subject often—or would intimate to us young ones afterwards, with a flattering praise we lovingly accepted—that he had been a brilliant exception among his fellow-workers ; but that she would not willingly see a son of hers go back to the

class from which her husband had raised himself by his distinguished abilities.

Knowing this, as an old family friend, Mrs. Gladman laid her hand tenderly on my arm.

‘Perhaps you were arguing for argument’s sake, dear ; young people sometimes do.’

Demonstrations of affection were supposed ridiculous in our family ; save always those of my father. But his were all of a most unsentimental nature, such as catching us girls and scrubbing our softer faces with his rough whiskers, alternately with kisses. Nevertheless, I stole out my hand to stroke that of my excellent friend, which completed our restored good understanding.

Then she told me a good deal about Mr. Fulke. How that he had a mother living in a pretty cottage half a mile off, up at the glen’s mouth—one which I had admired at a

distance. This poor lady was slowly dying of a painful illness that had darkened her latter life, and made even her son's companionship at times a burden to them both. Yet his devotion to her, whenever he could get a few spare days, was beautiful ; and he denied himself in all things for her sake. ' I have known him walk out here from Exeter, and be ill, footsore, and dusty—just for that reason, not that he would ever say so ! ' exclaimed Mrs. Gladman, ending her panegyric. (I felt so glad now the poor man *had* had that lift yesterday in the grocer's cart.)

After this, that evening I received Mr. Fulke so graciously when he came before tea, that he sat down beside me with quite an air of good comradeship.

' Ah ! I can see by your manner that poor foot is better, Miss Pleasance. It was pain-

ing you when I left the farm this morning. I saw that; for you could not speak to me.'

He looked at me so honestly with kindly pity, that my heart was full of shame, remembering why I would not thank him then; and I looked down.

'Tell me,' he went on, 'have I not got your name right,—Pleasance? It struck me this morning as so quaint and pretty.'

'I am glad you like it,' I murmured, feeling pleased, for at home my mother sighed secretly, I knew, over the Brown cognomen.

'Yes; and it just suits her,' said Mrs. Gladman, patting my shoulder, as she approached to call us to tea.

Then Jack insisted on carrying me. He quite bothered me with his sorrow and

contrition ; but he did not lift me nearly so comfortably as my previous bearer.

Tea was a noble meal at the farm ; very different from our former schoolroom milk and water diet. Mrs. Gladman gloried in her snowy table-linen and the brightness of her silver tea and coffee service. Then there was always such a great round of pressed beef for Jack and Bob to whet their appetites on ; and the home-made bread was so excellent ; the butter and cream surpassing all I have ever tasted since ; besides the great fresh currant-cakes and home-made gooseberry jam that Bob and I devoured nightly between us.

At this excellent repast our new guest laughingly described how I had distinguished myself that morning in the otter-hunt.

‘ I saw a young Atalanta come flying past

me, Mrs. Gladman, taking every fence like a bird.'

'Jack's cousins ran better than I did, for they kept up all day,' I interposed, in the interests of justice, though highly flattered.

'What? Emmy and Bessie—oh, they have got such big feet, no wonder they can cover the ground,' scoffed Jack; 'but,' looking at me with silly partiality, like the dear booby he was, 'how your tiny little ones can fly along at such a pace is a wonder!'

'And a nice sort of goose she was to go and stick on a rock in a hop-o'-my-thumb river like that,' put in brother Bob, stuffing his mouth full. He considered the sort of adulation going on very hurtful to a sisterly nature, so felt bound to counteract it.

Mrs. Gladman also thinking the conversation too personal for me, turned it.

‘ Well, Bob, how would you like to give up thoughts of the army and live in Devonshire with us ? ’

‘ Wouldn’t I just ? ’ said the youth. ‘ Only my mother says, I must be a soldier. So long as there is peace I’ll like it jolly well, I dare say ; but I do *not* see the fun of being shot.’

‘ You are more honest than brave then,’ said the stranger with an amused laugh.

‘ Oh, I’m just like lots of other fellows. (Some more jam, please.) There’s an old pensioner with a wooden leg in the village near our place, Stoke—he’s called Jerry Plant,—and he told me when the bullets were flying round him he’d have liked to run but for shame’s sake, and the men round wouldn’t have let him get away. “ Right you are,

Jerry," said I, "and I know I'd have liked to race you."'

'And is old Jerry alive still?' asked Mr. Fulke with roused interest. 'I mean does he still adorn your home, Stoke?'

'Oh, he's all alive. But he's not at Stoke itself. That's our own place, and the best one in England, too,' quoth Bob easily.

'*It is* the dearest old home in the world!' I warmly added, both of us rushing into our favourite subject, till I noticed that Mrs. Gladman was troubled; and remembered we might be recalling to the guest how his family had lost their estate.

'Pray don't stop them. It does me good to listen to such warm affection for their home,' he said, in an undertone to Mrs. Gladman.

However, Jack turned the talk, blundering in *à propos* of nothing. ‘Well, if I was in any man’s shoes, I’d as soon as any one else be you, Fulke. Still; though I’ll never have a fortune, nor make one on the Farm, perhaps for a stupid chap like me I’m as happy as I am.’

His older friend smiled kindly on the honest young fellow, and quoted—

‘Happy the man whose wish and care
A few *paternal* acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.’

That evening, and the following ones, what merry times we had with Jack and his friend at casino, commerce, and such good old games; whilst Mrs. Gladman laughed at us, sewing placidly under the lamp. But our days were soon made even more pleasant by

Mr. Fulke, who had promised to give Bob lessons in fishing—himself being the most accomplished angler far or near, as we learnt. So, my foot being soon better, I must needs go with them too.

What merry forenoons down the glen were those we spent! lunching under the birches and rowans, and then rambling homewards lazily while Mr. Fulke fished upon his way. Bob carried the basket with admiring eyes, and I was laden with great sprays of hawthorn-blossom. It was the time when

‘The palm and May make country-houses gay ;
Lambs frisk and play, the shepherds pipe all day,
And we hear aye birds tune this merry lay,—
Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-we, tu-witta-woo.’

Jack, meanwhile, used to pity himself for having to attend some large spring fairs, which

he vowed were dull instead of our society, for he loved Mr. Fulke dearly: but Bob absolutely worshipped him like a devoted dog.

Then Mr. Fulke went away. And although he had used to say so few words, his large presence seemed to have brought a sunlight of soul into the old brown parlour, we were so dull without him. But then we likewise said good-bye; and once more saw Stoke woods welcoming us.

Of course, after our parents' caresses and remarks on our improved condition were done, our brethren boisterously demanded full particulars of our visit to Arcadia. Bob, thereupon, burst into blaring praise of our new friend, whose virtues he could have trumpeted for hours unwearied; but, I, without quite knowing why, had become shy of doing the same now I was home again.

My mother, listening, asked me however some details as to Bob's last hero; and then lifting her eyebrows ever so slightly with languid gentleness of manner pronounced—

‘One of Mrs. Gladman's *protégés*, I see. Good soul! she is always taking up people who have come down in the world. He can't be anything very much; so I hope you were not too intimate with him, young as you are.’

Too intimate? My heart sank, remembering how freely Bob and I had babbled to that bank clerk, till he must have known about Stoke and its charms and our pursuits almost as well as ourselves. And he had always drawn us out more and more—unless we came near revealing too much of home life; then, I remembered, he had always checked our impulsive tongues.

In time I did forget Mr. Fulke ; yet, till I had grown up and grown out of those pleasant memories, he remained my ideal of a good son, fisherman, clerk, and loyal gentleman.

CHAPTER VII.

WE have all grown much, much older, since last I described our happy visit to Dartmoor in our golden age.

And now a great family event is agitating our circle. Alice is engaged to be married, to one of the matrimonial big prizes of last season—the rich Sir Dudley Digges.

It is after a London season—my first season, which seemed to me all hurry, racket, some delights and perhaps more disappointment; and in which nobody fell in love with me, nor I with anybody so far as I knew; though secretly longing to have met two or

three once-seen partners again—after all this we were once more at dear Stoke, to prepare for Alice's wedding.

Sir Dudley was expected to arrive in the afternoon, and there was to be a great family gathering to meet him.

Beau had foregone some last days at Cowes to be present. Having set the seal of his approval upon Alice's union, to my mother's great delight ; for she looked on her first-born as an oracle of the world of fashion. He was now a ' young man about town ; ' not knowing what work he should do, in spite of my father's commendations, nor much wishing to discover any ; rather fine—but still very kind to us all. Bob had come gaily from his crammers, dry with knowledge, he said, and thirsting for fun. Rose, who had been left in the country with her governess, was wild to see a wedding.

These two last were now plying me with questions, as to how it all happened? which I was unsuccessfully trying to parry. For the truth was that I had felt a certain fastidious regret about 'losing' my sister, and to Sir Dudley too, which Alice herself had promptly laughed me into suppressing.

It was before five o'clock tea-time; and we happened to have the dear old drawing-room to ourselves. Stoke was like Adam and Eve's bower that summer. Flowers, flowers were everywhere, from those beautifully painted on the brown-panelled walls to the rarest of orchids massed in the delicate china jars or fairy-like ideas in Venetian glass which our mother's exquisite taste had disposed around. She had delightfully modernized this old-fashioned room. The colours were all of the richest but subdued shades. Generations

(of former owners) had amassed with loving pride the beautiful objects around ; Venetian chandeliers, Eastern hangings, old miniatures, matchless ivory and ebony furniture, stiff and fragile ; but for comfort—oh ! the deepest and most delicious of modern lounges to ‘do nothing’ in. And roses—roses everywhere—peeped in ; framing the long glass windows set wide open, and giving vistas of fresh flowers glowing all round the smooth greensward, where the fountains always plashed in their pebbled nooks and creepers trailed over from their flower-full vases. Then away below the terraced slope, the lake gleamed in the sunlit glen—surrounded by the deep green woods which refreshed the eyes, insensibly wearied by the intense brilliance of the flower-beds burning with geraniums and anemones.

‘But how *did he propose?* tell us that?’

cried Rose directly, transfixing me with her bright brown eyes. Rose was declared by our mother—(as youngest she was the favourite)—to have the most common sense of us all.

‘Yes; that’s it,’ chirped Bob, putting his long yellow head quizzically on one side.

“Oh well; I may tell you that, for Alice told several of her friends while I was by one day, so I heard it,” I replied, feeling sure of my ground, and faithfully repeating our eldest sister’s words. ‘She said she never thought the old thing (I mean, correcting myself, she said the dear old thing) cared about her till one afternoon he began mumbling so to her she could not think what he was saying. But at last he asked clearly, might he speak to mother, so Alice guessed of course, and said he had much better, thinking it would save trouble. Then he went to mother, who was

sitting in her boudoir—and they arranged it all between them.’

‘And was that *all*?’ uttered Bob disgusted, whilst Rose scrutinized me still with calmly expectant eyes.

‘Oh well, nearly all—at least Alice said; “then he just touched her fringe with his beard, and she felt in such a panic lest he had made it look frightful for the afternoon under her bonnet;” that was all—’ I ended, assuming an air of cynical lightness.

My younger brother and sister eyed me with evident disapprobation.

‘And that’s what you women have all been making such a fuss about. I call it very poor sport,’ pronounced Bob in disgust.

‘Yes, and I didn’t expect it of you, Pleasance, either, to speak in such a heartless way about it. Why, I don’t believe Alice

can care for him one bit !' added Rose, denouncing my worldliness. Whilst I—conscious of having cried bitterly in secret at the idea of our pretty Alice tying herself voluntarily to a middle-aged dullard—dropped my wedding-mask of complacency and looked at them both rather miserable-eyed.

'What's *the use* of tormenting oneself when Alice is so delighted about it; and mother and Beau, and all the rest of the world?' I abruptly asked.

'Oh, none at all,' promptly agreed Bob. 'Only you look as if you *had* been doing so all the same! which as yourself remarked is foolish. So long as Alice likes it, what's the odds?'

Here he began airily trying to balance my mother's best *Sèvres bonbonnière* on his nose, to its extreme peril and my terror.

‘Well, no; *you* can’t help it, Pleasance,’ chimed in Rose, who like Bob had begun to see the matter from another side, and to think any extreme personal sensibility on my part misplaced. She was happy in having a mind that always trotted cheerfully along the level in opinions, and even dipped and rose as little in joys and sorrows as could reasonably be consistent with a loving little heart and good temper. But I felt as if the rest of my family were always weighing me, even in small matters, and finding me light in the balance. *Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin!*—My own fault. Why must I be ever dangerously climbing along the heights of enthusiasm or painfully floundering in the depths of woe?

‘You might tell us what our brother-in-law is like, however,’ pursued Bob; nearly upset-

ting two fragile chairs and a little table by stretching his legs out to their extremest length before him, and his arms behind his head likewise to an alarming extent as he yawned.

‘Yes, do begin; what is his hair like?’ demanded Rose.

‘It is not so much black-silvered as grizzled,’ I replied, transposing Hamlet. ‘But it’s thick enough still except for one bald patch just on the crown, and he has a beard rather less grizzled, that always seems trying to turn up and look at his face.’

‘That’s pretty—Rose! Well, what sort of sized man is he, Pleasance?’

‘Oh, he is big enough and stout, too; not amiss in that way.’ (I secretly admired men of goodly stature.) ‘His head may be a trifle large; but not much.’

‘That’s better, Bob; and what eyes, Pleasance?’

‘His eyes are not good, poor man. They are small and light-coloured, and his eye-lashes are very pale.’

‘Dreadful! He must look just like a pig,’ ejaculated Rose, hitting off a resemblance in poor Sir Dudley’s eyes which had secretly struck me before.

‘He did not make himself, or choose his eyes either,’ was my retort, nevertheless; feeling the censure too unfair.

‘Well, but look here, Pleasance,’ cried Bob, raising his voice as requesting a final decision. ‘Since we are acknowledged to be a family of two sorts, Browns and Beaumanoirs, which division will our respected brother-in-law belong to—the stupids or the shining lights, eh?’

‘Well, I think he is certainly more of a goose than a swan,’ I answered laughing. ‘Perhaps as he is a great gourmand and complains of a liver, we might call him a Strasburg goose!’

‘Pleasance!—I am shocked and surprised!’ said my mother’s voice. Entering with her light footfall, she had heard the latter part of our conversation, and added in a tone low but so cold it withered me: ‘It is wrong, even unchristian, to prejudice your young brother and sister in this way. What better do *you* expect, I wonder, than such a splendid match as your elder sister is making? Sir Dudley Digges’s personal merits quite satisfy the rest of your family; but your ideas are so ridiculous that perhaps you will want to turn nurse or missionary, or to marry a penniless curate. At least, I beg you will not try to make Rose

as foolish as yourself; for some day I look to her making quite as good a marriage as Alice.' Contrary to her usual self-possession our mother left the room after saying this, her step somewhat agitated, and her still graceful figure heaving with an anger she would not otherwise betray.

Unlucky me! . . . Why, oh why! had she not come five minutes sooner to have heard the perfect propriety of my sentiments, till the honest expressions of my favourite brother and sister had stirred my heart?

'Poor Pleasance! You have put your foot in it this time,' uttered Bob in a pitying voice.

'I *am* so sorry! But perhaps we had better take ourselves out of sight for a little till it has blown over,' added Rose, young as she was, being practical. I finished my tea in

guilty silence, and we stole out on the lawn, just out of direct view of the windows, but ready if summoned to the august Digges' presence.

Meanwhile, we had heard my father's quick cheery step in the inner hall; then my mother evidently arrested the onward progress we were all three hailing with joy.

It flashed upon me, with that quick insight we gain into the motives of those with whom we live, that her reason in going out to meet him so quickly, was to avoid my father's entering during any possible further discussion of Sir Dudley.

Somehow I felt sure he was in sympathy with me; that his evident sorrow at losing his pretty Alice was deeper than it need have been, whilst there seemed a forced acqui-

escence when mother so often with gentlest artifices strove to place his future son-in-law before him in the most flattering light. Yes ; many little things—half-sighs I had caught, if no one else, a look stolen at Alice now and again of troubled, fond inquiry, an almost imperceptible clouding of that dear sunny face when the subject of the marriage was uppermost—all came with new conviction to my mind. I was sorry for him, dear old dad ; but wonderfully consoled by the thought that we two felt alike.

‘ What are you three out here for, looking as glum as owls ? ’ asked Alice, tripping out of the glass-door, and looking so pretty and light-hearted as she joined us. Her golden-brown hair was waved all over her small head, and fringed on her forehead. She had the roundest of laughing faces, with no

noticeable features but good eyes and a most kissable little mouth with perfect teeth—the general effect being that of a charming child's face. 'She looks so innocent,' said many people. Truly, as Shakspeare sang :

‘If she be made of red and white,
Her faults shall ne’er be known.’

But before any of us could or would answer Alice, a little Gothic door near us, leading from the shrubbery, opened with a sharp click, and Miss Bee Beaumanoir appeared beside us, emerging with the briskness of a female Jack-in-the-box. Although she was expected this evening, still she always contrived to make her mode of arrival *un*-expected to her own vast delight.

‘Well, chickabiddies ! here I am,’ she exclaimed, as we crowded round her. She

seemed positively to have the very same gown and bonnet on her spare little person as when first we had beheld her.

‘So here’s the pretty bride. Well, Miss Brown, my dear, I hope you’re not too fine to speak to me.’ (For years she had taken peculiar pleasure in addressing Alice with this sentence.) ‘Is your bridegroom paying a good price for you, eh? But I won’t keep you now; for I’ve an idea that he was driving along the approach as I took the short cut through the shrubbery. So be off to meet him. No, no—we won’t come in until the tender greetings are over!’

Alice shrugged her pretty shoulders and went indoors, still turning her head to smile and nod back at us, with a most easy *disengaged* air. Her figure looked charming in her pale-pink summer gown that fitted

exquisitely, and was coquettishly trimmed with lace on flounces and furbelows.

‘ Upon my word, Alice looks as if she had been turned into a jelly, and run into that gown,’ went on Miss Beaumanoir, as I may sometimes call her, since she did not greatly like being often addressed as ‘aunt.’ Then turning to me : ‘ Now, child, let me see *you* ! Come ; you’re filled out, and grown taller than ever ; but you’re too pale, and you’ve still got that old trick of looking one through and through with those great eyes of yours. Pray, why are you not in a pink gown too, instead of this sad-coloured grey calico ? ’

‘ You see, Alice always dislikes so much our dressing alike, as if we had no different ideas between us,’ I murmured. ‘ So as she always wears pinks and blues, and that she chooses my dresses for me—’

‘ You get only greys and greens,’ cried my grand-aunt with an expressive grimace.

‘ Pleasance, my dear, with your want of spirit, what a nice sort of first season you must have had ! Did Alice allow you *any* admirers, or did she throw you a few of her cast-off ones ? But you were always the same from a child ; why can’t you assert your own rights instead of being made to sit with your back to the horses through life.’

‘ Some one *must* give up in a large family, if things are to go smoothly,’ I answered, flashing out with an evidence of possessing some of that spirit my grand-aunt disbelieved in. But she did not heed—being engrossed suddenly like Bob and Rose in listening to the sound of voices in the drawing-room. We all crept nearer, just sheltered by the projection of the bay window. It was a

shabby trick ; but our grand-aunt was foremost.

‘ Yes ! I drove along very comfortably from the station in Mr. Brown’s dog-cart. Thought you would have come to meet me, Alice Oh, all right—doesn’t matter ! ’ Sir Dudley was heard saying in a thick voice, without the smallest variation of tone. ‘ Had a queer sort of companion, though. An old woman who was trailing her gown along in the dust, just like the foolishness of those kind of people (not that it was worth picking out of the gutter) ; she hailed me and asked, if I was coming in this direction, would I kindly give her a lift. So, ’pon my honour, as it’s so hot a day, and she seemed carrying a bundle, or something that must have tired her, you’ll all think me very soft, but I said “ Up you get ! ” and she hopped up. How-

ever, your groom seemed to know about her, for he whispered to me it was all right.' Miss Bee crept nearer the window.

'But what became of her?' asked my mother rather anxiously.

'Well, I brought her up your drive here till we came to what I saw was the back way to the stables and so forth, so then I said, "My good woman! you had better get down here; that's evidently your road." So down she got, and I suppose at this moment she is being entertained by your cook. Queer old girl—wonder who she was?'

'Would you know her again if you saw her?' asked our venerable aunt, suddenly stepping in through the open low window.

Tableau inside! Sir Dudley's feelings and those of my mother may be imagined.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE days that now preceded the wedding seemed still all racket and bustle no less than in London, if differently so ; and I felt even more alone. Each post and train brought wedding-presents and new dresses, to see which unpacked gave the greatest delight to every female mind in the house, next to receiving these themselves ; yet generally, when I cried out with admiration at sight of some fresh lovely object, Alice would carelessly answer after this fashion :

‘ Why, I thought I had shown it to everybody the other day. Don’t bother, Pleasance

dear. Oh, the Mackenzies sent it, or the Mackintoshes, I believe—shabby enough of them! Now I must settle about the bridesmaids' dresses, and you are only in the way. You might just go out to the garden and amuse poor old Dudley.'

Sir Dudley, smoking rather sulkily along the terraces, would however have none of my timidly-offered ministrations. Plainly if Alice would not herself come for one of the *tête-à-tête* interviews he stolidly tried to get and she as laughingly avoided, he declined all others of the inferior sex; but consoled himself with the 'Times,' or was conducted for the fiftieth time round the farmyard by father with anxious efforts for his entertainment.

One especial day, thus relieved from my disagreeable task, I roamed in the gardens to enjoy a few moments of sweet, perfect stillness

away from the house turmoil. Though every tree, bush, and flower of dear Stoke welcomed me back, yet there was still a sense of disappointment in my heart, and I wished myself a child again. Little though Alice had allowed me to be her companion, the vague hope of becoming more to her had always led me on—though she would have laughed at my sisterly longing as sentimental.

Really, I was lonely those days ; and no one clung more to companionship. My mother ? —well, she liked first to enjoy a large and exclusive share of my father's society ; next, that of her favourite children ; lastly, she had the constant care of our position in society. Beau was a *Sèvres* china sort of elder brother, much admired from a distance, but seldom brought into contact with us country bumpkins. Bob, my best-beloved, seldom seemed

to care, when at home, to give up an hour's amusement for me. Rose was still fast bound by that iron rule, perhaps wholesome, of many English mothers like our own, whose school-room girls are not permitted to be seen except at lunch-time; their society being restricted to that of their governess, and their wildest indulgences to currant-cake at six-o'clock tea and a good cry over the 'Heir of Redclyffe.'

I scarcely ever saw her.

My father alone—! But as I was thinking, he came down the gravelled path towards me. He had evidently escaped from Sir Dudley, and was weary, for the old quick tread was slow and heavy.

'Well, my pet! why are you by yourself?' he asked, putting his arm round my shoulders, and relaxing from his occupied air into a slow saunter of satisfaction. 'I don't

like to see you so much alone, do you know, Pleasance ? It's not good for young people.'

'Who is there for me to be with ?' I asked, glad and contented at once by his presence, adding with a mock pout, a piece of silly gaiety I never indulged in to others : '*You* never have time to spare for me now ; and you know very well no one else especially wants me.'

'Ah, well,' said my father with a quick half-sigh that surprised me, as he tightened his embrace, 'I can't give you as much companionship as I would like, dear ; but as I may have to lose you too, like Alice, I can hardly tell you, my child, how earnestly I trust your husband may be a good man whom you can entirely love and respect.'

I thought of Sir Dudley almost with a shudder; and drew closer to his shoulder, exclaiming, ‘Oh, father, I never want to leave you!’

He smiled, well pleased, but rather sadly (I remember wondering why at the time).

‘My pet; we must part in the course of nature long before your life’s race will be run. May the All-wise Father of us all send you a wiser, better companion on the road than your old father.’

‘Please, sir,’ said a footman appearing at this moment, ‘Mrs. Brown wants you particularly to come in.’

We two approached the windows—our first dear discourse since many a day thus stopped short. My mother rustled out, in her invariably handsome dress, to meet us; looking like an anxious General whose second in

command had left her alone to bear the day's heat and burden.

‘My dear, do you know that Sir Dudley is alone in the drawing-room?’ she said, in gentle reproach. Then turning to me with a more injured tone: ‘And really, Pleasance, instead of idling, you might be helping your poor sister, I think. There are two dozen notes of thanks for presents to be written, and you can easily imitate Alice’s hand. She has left the list for you in the library.’

In very truth, since early morning till late at night, I had been slaving and toiling for Alice, without a word of thanks or even recognition; yet it was only now I felt really vexed. I knew Alice *had* time in plenty to write her own letters, since she simply flitted like a butterfly from her dresses to her presents: and then—well, she might have

deigned to consult me a little about my own bridesmaid's dress ! On second thoughts, however, my sister was more anxious to suit the rather different figures and complexions of the two Miss Pawletts, nieces of the bridegroom. Lady Pawlett, Sir Dudley's sister, was a person of influence in London society, and 'so much depended on pleasing her !' our mother had anxiously said, thinking of her daughter's first flight alone from the paternal nest. Out upon my selfishness, then !—yet I wished our wedding over, whilst turning meekly indoors.

'But, Ada, this is becoming a tax,' said my father decidedly. 'Alice must come and entertain Sir Dudley herself, instead of putting it on all of us.'

'She is so busy, poor child,' said my mother excusingly. 'She has been setting

out all her presents in my boudoir for show ; and he will go in and disturb her so, she says, that really she can do nothing right.'

'No matter ; it is her duty to try and please him, so the sooner she begins the better.'

'It will be all right, you will see, *after marriage*,' declared my mother with such a tone of thorough conviction in her voice, that I, hearing no more, might well suppose the discussion ended.'

This was one of her favourite maxims. Perhaps, secretly, she believed in its infallibility from her own experience ; since certainly her own was a case in point. Herself supposed to have made a match rather of prudence and esteem than of affection—although my father's ardent attachment to the poor county

beauty was a matter of history—there was no doubt that ‘after marriage’ he had entirely won her heart by devoting to her a life-time of constant, forbearing devotion; whilst she recognized that such a wise superior mind as his does not always accompany so large and patient a heart. We all knew that whilst loving her own way and to affect rule, yet she leaned in the main more on my father’s strong Brown sense than she would have owned—even at the very time she might be trying to sway him to a Beaumanoir whim, and that seldom in vain, by the affection he bore her.

‘Slaving away, Cinderella!’ remarked my grand-aunt’s cynical old voice. ‘Bless me, how hot I am! I’ve been out with Bob breaking in the bay filly till I nearly got a sunstroke. It’s a pity I’ve not a fortune,

or I'd leave it all to that boy. We've been enjoying ourselves finely, while you've been moped in this dark library till you look as grave and lonely as a nun. I'll tell you what it is, Pleasance, you want *billets doux* and *chiffons* to brighten you up, as the French say, who know women well. With a pink dress like Alice's, and a lover, you'd see what a different girl you would be.'

'I must be different, indeed, if I could stand a lover like Alice's,' I cried, gathering up all my notes that Miss Bee's old shawl had swept far and wide over the polished floor.

My grand-aunt was most kind to me, yet her sympathy was not always pleasing. She pickled her good-nature in vinegar too often, and was as exaggerated in her words

as in her dress and manners. She would have given us to her last crust and penny with all her kindly queer heart, but had not to give me other gifts most prized from those we love,—wise womanly counsel, delicate understanding, all the guidance, forbearance, and help that are the fruits of experience and affection in our elders. Besides, one could better romp with dear old Bee than venerate so *un-venerable* a grand-aunt.

One afternoon, two days later, I was sitting alone in the little flower-garden, called My Lady's garden, after a long dead Lady Betty, who had married a Bracy when George I. was king; and had left for all memories of a short sweet youth, this pretty pleasaunce planned in the bride-year that was her last; and a full-length por-

trait inserted in the wainscoting of our inner hall.

So, I was alone, and for once idle. The others had all gone off, a large party, in the coach to meet Lady Pawlett and her daughters at the station; Beau driving, but Bob consoling himself loudly with the horn.

‘There is hardly room for you, Pleasance,’ Alice had said graciously, as prime minister; ‘still come if you like.’

‘Pleasance, there is no room for you; so you will stay and see that tea is ready for us,’ my mother gently commanded, adding in a lower tone: ‘I want Sir Dudley and Alice to have the back seat to themselves, and it does not really matter much about *your* making friends with the Pawlett girls.’

So they started, and in the sunny, sleepy

afternoon I was sitting in the remotest corner of this my favourite nook, lulled by the hour, the unusual quiet, the heavy flower-scents, and the 'hot noise of bees.' There were several summer-houses hidden in various green recesses of My Lady's garden,—a shell-house, a thatched bower inlaid with wood, and this last, my favourite, lined with blue Dutch tiles showing the true story of Reynard the Fox. It had low oaken seats in which one could really rest, and look out through lattices of coloured glass—wide-opened this day—at the lake and glen on one side; or up green alleys lined with flowers, to where above the topmost terraces some gable or chimney of Stoke could just be seen.

I was looking out of one of the windows, framed in sweet jessamine, my head leant idly on my hand, and a book dropped

side-ways down, while I hummed from memory—

‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying ;
And this same flower that smiles to-day,
To-morrow will be dying.’

Before the last murmured word had left my parted lips, there was a rustle below among the leaves. What—who was this . . . ? A young man was gazing up at me, and I having never seen him before gazed back astonished. How long he had been there I did not know ; but in those few silent seconds that followed, his face, as he stood still in the vivid sunlight, was stamped as clearly on my memory as his figure stood out distinct against the yew-hedge behind.

If I shut my eyes now, I could—if I still would—see him just so again.

Not of tall stature, but, in the old-fashioned phrase, goodly in face; well-built and active. He had crisply-waved chestnut hair and somewhat redder moustache, a clear-cut nose that seemed almost as expressive of its owner's moods as his other features, and the most sleepy, laughing, good-humoured blue eyes in the world upturned towards me. How many more moments still the situation might have lasted I cannot tell, but that (being far too shy to speak first) my pale cheeks felt a sudden crimson tide.

He took off his hat.

‘Miss Pleasance Brown, I think? The butler told me you were in the garden. It seems I was not expected till a later train. May I introduce myself? My name is Clair St. Leger.’

‘Oh yes; excuse my not knowing sooner.

You are to be Sir Dudley's best man,' I murmured, coming forward to the arbour-door with all the gracious dignity I could muster, to greet such a distinguished wedding-guest. He sprang lightly up the steps to meet my proffered hand. 'We have heard of you from my eldest brother, too,' I went on; 'I believe you are a great friend of his. Beau has driven the coach over to meet you. He will be so sorry.'

'Well, I cannot be very sorry, as it gives me the pleasure of seeing this charming spot; and of making your acquaintance a little sooner,' he replied.

His voice had that indescribable charm, which the French rightly therefore term the *je ne sais quoi*, of a man who has so lived in the world and its best society, that *it* has made *him* what he is; while he and his like

make it. In manner, too, he had a peculiarly soft winning way, a graceful ease; (I know a few unkind acquaintance called this impudence—but there seldom was a more universal favourite). Now, seeing I was an *ingénue*, he took the lead, yet with an air of most courteous deference that flattered my young pride. He asked me to show him the garden, with which he declared himself already fascinated—‘This fairy-like domain, where you were looking out of your bower-lattice like an enchanted princess,’ he laughingly called it. So I did the honours of the yew hedges and pleached alleys; the showers of white jessamine or sweet honeysuckle that brushed our faces as we passed under arches almost closed with blossoms; the pebbled paths and paved runnels down which little streamlets always trickled, fed fresh from the hill above. He

gathered me a softly-pale pink rose that was out of my reach ; and I gravely gave him a sweet white bud.

‘It is lovely ; but is it appropriate ?’ he asked, luring me to a bench shaded from the hot afternoon sun. Then, as I looked at him full in questioning surprise, he added—just veiling his eyes with lashes as long as any woman’s, while a peculiar little dainty twitch of his clearly-cut nose seemed to imply, that though the words coming were not worth his smile, yet they meant in his own mind a little more than common (very likely he fancied the trick unnoticed)—‘Would not a red bud have described me better ? I am afraid it would,’ he went on. ‘I have a sort of theory about roses, Miss Pleasance . . . Brown.’ (How long invented, I now wonder ?) ‘See ! white roses are for innocence and childhood ;

but this lovely pink one of yours, only just tinged a little warmer in the heart, ought to describe yourself; while the deep red means the older, perhaps sinful, beings who have lived so much longer in the world—like me.’

‘But can innocence not go beyond the days of childhood?’ I asked, half-startled to find myself classed in the pink stage.

‘Why, yes—it may, of course; only I meant, perhaps, more the *ignorance* of the good and evil of this world,’ he laughed, looking at me out of those blue eyes that had such a caressing expression. ‘To have “lived and loved,” is not that to know?—And it would surprise me very much if you had passed through a season without having seen some such effect in others, around you. Although I could almost dare to swear’ (looking at me keenly), ‘that it is only from such a

reflected glow that your rose might take a shade of pink.'

My face was pink enough now.

'I forgot—I wanted to make a bouquet for my father's study-table,' I murmured for an answer, scarcely alarmed at his idle words and slow soft look, yet with a strange feeling.

'Let me help you. I am very fond of making bouquets,' cried Mr. St. Leger, rising at once to gather my flowers. Then when my lap was full, and that he had wooed me to equanimity again with moss rose-buds, and won me altogether back to happy converse by the daintiest sprays of clematis and hop tendrils gathered above my reach, we sat down again together; while he chose out which flowers I should use as pleased his sovereign liking. We were like a pair of

innocent children. He scolded my imputed want of skill. I retorted upon his conceit.

It was all such simple, innocent amusement that I need hardly have felt so startled, when there came calls through the garden, and Alice and Beau, of all people! appeared searching for us.

‘Pleasance! how could you be so forgetful as not to have given poor Mr. St. Leger some tea?’ cried Alice chidingly, after a bright welcome to the guest. ‘We have all been back some time; and were wondering what *had* become of you.’

‘I did ask him, but he preferred staying here,’ I murmured, falling back with a sort of shock into my subdued position of the one who did everything wrong.

‘Yes. I declared for tea-roses instead of tea, and lilies instead of late luncheon,’

interposed Clair St. Leger, taking in the situation at a glance, and taking up my defence against the disapproving looks of both Beau and my sister; adding with a laugh: 'To own the truth, I had had a glass of sherry and a biscuit from the butler when I arrived.'

'That is all right, old chap,' uttered Beau with a satisfied air, in his rather affected drawl, as he glanced at me, reassured on the score of my good behaviour; adding graciously:

'Pleasance has been taught by having brothers, what are the real wants and likings of misrepresented man.'

Who?—I! Secretly I hung my head, for it had never once occurred to me that my pleasant companion's sportiveness among the flowers and over our bouquet arose from the secret consciousness of having had sherry and

biscuits; but I kept my own counsel. As Alice and I went towards the house, Beau and his friend following us in affectionate discourse, my sister said, glancing at me curiously: ‘Really it quite *looked* as if you and Mr. St. Leger were flirting together when I first saw you. Take care, Pleasance; that is going ahead rather fast.’

‘Flirting? Did you ever know me flirt before,’—in an injured tone.

‘No, never. I don’t believe it is in you,’ laughed Alice good-naturedly, but with a certain something of secret superiority as she said so. ‘Only *he* is supposed to know as much about it as most people. Come!—Mamma was inclined to be angry because you were not in to receive us, but I’ll make it all straight.’

I followed her into the drawing-room,

feeling rather injured and abashed, for really it sometimes struck me that my mother would understand me better if Alice did not always interpose as if a necessary ambassador between us. There, Lady Pawlett, a tall handsome woman with dark eyes, looked me all over ; but did not take the trouble to say anything ; though turning to my mother next moment she began talking with effusive warmth, and most agreeably as she sipped her tea. The two Misses Pawlett, middle-sized, plain girls, looked at me too in a stolid way ; made a sort of soundless effort each to speak, but produced no word, apparently because they had nothing to say.

Evidently, having come to stay with us, they considered it only fit they should be entertained, but had no idea of entertaining me ; although I had rushed desperately into

conversation in the hopes of atoning for my pleasant indiscretion in the garden.

Alice had gaily retreated under cover of allowing some mild love-making to Sir Dudley in the next room. By her quizzical look towards me, she knew already what a hopeless task she had left me. It was an inexpressible relief when my mother rose and proposed showing her guests to their rooms to rest before dinner; which offer Lady Pawlett accepted with cheerful alacrity, observing :

‘It does take me so much longer to dress properly after a journey. But my girls will take a nap instead, I know—lazy children! You see I am the active one of the family, dear Mrs. Brown.’

Miss Pawlett, at this, gave a sort of mysterious smile, observing in a strangely

impressive undertone: 'It's often the best way of passing one's time.'

Miss Amy Pawlett, the other 'child' of three or four-and-twenty, followed in obedient silence; giving one backward look of some slow regret, however, at Beau and his friend St. Leger, who just then crossed the inner hall on their way to the former's private den.

CHAPTER IX.

UP-STAIRS in my own room, for a delicious hour and a half before dinner, I was free to think again over what had passed.

Why—what was it? I had only been in the garden, and seen a stranger. And now he was not a stranger any more; while I felt so much richer by having found such a pleasant acquaintance who had been living some six-and-twenty years in the world, without my having ever known it!

There were three small windows in my low wide room under the western cottage-roof—one to dress at; one to write at; one

to look out of, with the fairest view of all, down below on the lake where the swans were like silver specks. Here I sat down, and gazed, seeing very little of the real beautiful world; dreaming idly, in the window-seat, with a most singular lack of invention. For indeed all that I saw and thought was only of what had passed in the garden; trying—already—to fit in my memory all the pleasant looks and quaint turns of speech, and the few complimentary words said with such a flattering intonation by Mr. Clair St. Leger. It was delightfully difficult; for their essence, like a dreamily subtle atmosphere, was round me still, while half of what we had both said seemed ready to vanish away—silly speeches enough, but I liked to rescue them again from oblivion.

How well he had looked, when first I saw

him standing down there in the sun!—so on I thought, and thought again.

It had been like Beaumont and Fletcher's lines :

‘Sitting in my window,
Printing my thoughts in lawn, I saw a god,
I thought (but it was you), enter our gates ;
My blood flew out, and back again as fast
As I had puffed it forth, and sucked it in
Like breath ; then was I called away in haste
To entertain you.’

Having made my calculations with secret joy that Mr. St. Leger must certainly take me in to dinner—since Beau and Bob would naturally have the Miss Pawletts for their share—I dressed myself with more than usual care. The pink rose seemed to nestle of its own accord low down among the dark-brown coils of my hair (we still wore flowers in our hair in those days). For the first time

I became aware that my shoulders were really whiter than the soft folds of my shimmering white dress edged with delicate lace that half veiled them ; while my throat did not compare unfavourably with the double string of pearls that clasped it. In London I had felt so raw and countryfied, plunged straight from the schoolroom into society, outshone by Alice, and painfully aware that my mother believed I would not be a success, and at all events must not be brought forward till Alice was well married ; but now, once more at home, I felt to-night quite the assured airs of a fine London belle. As I shook out my long skirts before the glass in the westering light, my figure seemed taller and more lissom than ever before, though it would have always pleased Lord Byron's taste when he wrote, ' I hate your dumpy women.' How

silly of me! but I turned my long neck a little this way and that, to study the best poise and carriage of my head; and was glad that if my face was pale it was not pasty like that of poor Miss Pawlett, whilst my eyes seemed large and dark-brown enough to give shade and their sober colour to light up my other features. I must have been partly right, for as I came down the old oak stairs into the inner hall, which we used as a sort of lounging-room, Bob—who was making solitary lunges there over our ladies' tiny billiard-table—put down his cue with an applauding rattle and cried under his breath, 'Whew! You do look stunning, old girl! What has happened, that you are so—so transmogrified?'

'Bob,' I only replied with sweet severity, 'it is time for you to put on your best man-

ners, and come into the drawing-room with me.'

The March hare grinned; and putting down his cue performed a cartwheel, on his hands and feet, like a street-boy, the full length of the hall, the last turn of which triumphantly replanted him in an upright position again at the foot of the stairs, just as Lady Pawlett was sailing downwards. Her poor daughters humbly followed; their stout shapes looking oddly in rather short muslin frocks, blue sashes, and black shoes, like little school-room girls.

'Dear me! quite a feat of—eccentricity,' remarked her Ladyship blandly; gazing at him with a much more benignant glance than she had ever deigned towards *me*, whilst Bob stood looking redder than even the glow of his exercise warranted.

‘What it is to be a man—or, rather, even a boy!’ thought I.

In the drawing-room an indescribable air of high spirits seemed brought among us by St. Leger. He stood smiling in the centre of a group that had drawn insensibly round him, as if, feeling himself Phœbus, he was glad to beam; and somehow all we women felt elated by his presence.

‘Look at that fellow,’ muttered Beau, half-admiringly, half-peevisly in my ear. ‘How does he get his tailor to fit him so, I wonder!’

I could not answer, for my heart suddenly sank. The door had opened to admit our curate, an excellent little man of no individuality; and I found him offering *me* his arm to dinner whilst the owner of the exquisitely fitting coat passed me, smiling, with dear

old Aunt Bee, whose claims I had quite forgotten.

It was a dinner of cross purposes—rather like the game of Crooked Attorney, when every one answers for some one else, or pays forfeit. My ears, shame to tell, were pricked to catch every low soft inflection of Mr. St. Leger's utterance as he talked pleasantly enough to my grand-aunt; so that I heard nothing of many interesting details concerning the working of our new soup-kitchen, the last of the many charities with which my father had flooded the parish. At the lower end of the table, Lady Pawlett, with much play of her still fine dark eyes and liberal *display* of white shoulders, was trying to fascinate my dear simple father. He, quite unconscious of all this, was only uneasy that mother seemed somewhat neglecting poor dull Lord

Pawlett, whilst enlivening her other guests with her own especial gift of bright, clever, yet always gentle attack and repartee; talking as ladies in the old, well-bred *salons* used. He did not understand that in society people followed Lady Pawlett's lead in neglecting her spouse, whose principal duty seemed to be putting down her empty tea-cup, or carrying her shawl; so now father sent the butler with occasional quiet little messages of—'Would not Lord Pawlett try this hock, or the sherry of some dead, famous connoisseur?—considered rather fine, he believed.' On which, pleased gleams lit up his silent Lordship's inexpressive face.

'Good gracious, my dear Mr. Brown, you are quite spoiling my husband,' interposed my Lady with gracious peevishness several times. 'But you millionnaires hardly know

what to do with your money, I suppose. *We* never could afford such wine.' Opposite me, Bee, with her gray hair skewered atop of her head by a tortoiseshell arrow, in honour of our guests, her old black barège dress looking scarcely the worse for wear since these many years (for even then it *could* hardly have been shabbier), was riding full tilt one of her favourite hobbies. She was entertaining St. Leger vastly, and, indeed, most of those around, with a lively history of how the Bey or Dey of Tunis or Morocco (I forget which) had fallen desperately in love with her, on one of her travels; offering to put away all his other wives for her sake; till finding this meant bowstringing she had beat a hasty retreat to spare her conscience.

On this our good curate, who had a mind as simple and gentle as a baby, but was one

of those persons who cannot laugh and let a joke go by—always wanting instead first to *understand* it, then to ask questions about it, lastly liking to harp back upon it for a year to come, when the rest of the world is sick thereof—he now gravely observed in preliminary :

‘ Well now, Miss Beaumanoir, I can hardly understand that ; I always understood that those Mussulman fanatics admired *fat* women.’

He stopped short disconcerted at the roar of laughter which came from us all ; for our grand-aunt was as ‘ lene as is a rake,’ and shrivelled to a shred of humanity.

‘ Never mind,’ she cried patronizingly, joining heartily in the laugh. ‘ I see you are a man of taste, and like slim figures—like me. Oh, I see you and I would get on famously

together. Come! I'm off to the Nile next month, and you may come with me—there's an offer. It will open your mind tremendously, and all you stay-at-home people want that. You'll see, the ancient Egyptians were much more civilized than your dear Israelites. I'll take you under my wing, and be a mother to you.'

Almost blushing at the last part of the kind proposal, my neighbour, with all eyes upon him, murmured he feared his parish would not like it if he took such a long holiday—even if he wished it.

'Bless you! they'd never miss you,' cried our grand-aunt heartily. 'Why, the last time I was in the Holy Land we had seven clergymen, all of our party, with Cook. Three Baptists, a Moravian, a Wesleyan, and two Irvingites. I was the best friends in the

world with every man of them. Only the poor Wesleyan had his tent next mine, and he *did* wrestle so in prayer, he kept me awake half the night! He was a fine fellow.'

Our curate, though liberal-minded, seemed dubious at this partisanship. Lady Pawlett, who was 'high,' tossed her head as if scandalized. Beau artfully interposed.

'Have me for one of your party, too, Bee' (our grand-aunt loved being called Bee by her nephews); 'St. Leger and I, eh? We would be very good boys, I promise you; and you know you love young men.'

'Pray do, Miss Beaumanoir—I can hardly imagine a more agreeable companion,' responded Clair St. Leger. At that moment his eye caught mine—as it had already done once or twice that evening—with more meaning in the sunny glance I fancied than there

was for others ; while an almost imperceptible accent on the word ‘hardly’ quickened my foolish pulses with a flattered feeling.

‘Take you two elegant extracts ! Not I indeed,’ cried Bee in her highest good-humour. ‘Why ! the last time, Beau, you came to stay at the Barn for the Duchess of Westerton’s ball, you brought a dressing-case so big and so broad it required my three maids and the gardener to carry it up-stairs. If you were only going to Paris, I’ve no doubt you would think it necessary to travel with your bed, bath, cheval-glass, a wardrobe, and a *coffin*.’

As the laughter over this died away, we heard Sir Dudley speaking, almost for the first time. Quoth he, solemnly, in answer to some interesting question of his hostess,

‘*Ve-ry* tender mutton, indeed, Mrs. Brown ; yes, I assure you. And the plates are so

thoroughly hot, too. 'Pon my soul! I like plain dinners like yours, thoroughly well cooked, far better than the wretched attempts of most people at fine dishes.'

My mother sat serenely beaming after this compliment, as if her mind was at rest. But old Aunt Bee, gazing expressively at the nearest *menu*-card of what was by no means a meagre feast, muttered audibly to St. Leger, who wickedly egged her on in her outspokenness—

'Plain dinner indeed! I wish I had him at the Barn,—bacon and eggs, and porter!'

As to the rest of us, Alice paid no attention whatever to Sir Dudley, but laughed with and listened to every one else. Of the two dull Pawlett girls, the younger, who was with Bob, looked at Beau; and the elder,

who was with Beau, looked at the opposite wall. I have already owned whose eyes met mine, and who had my secret attention.

Later on, in the drawing-room, Lady Pawlett sank into the most comfortable chair she could find, near the door by which the gentlemen would enter; ordered one daughter to find her a foot-stool; and gave the other languidly her tea-cup to hold. There, as she conversed with my mother and Alice with volubility, both 'the children,' as she called them, sat by watching for her behests. They were so like maids in waiting, that, much as I pitied them, I hardly liked to distract their furtive attention. In a way, it did me good to see them; for being sometimes inclined to think my mother's very absolute love of her own way a heavy if gentle yoke, here

was the contrast of a how much heavier one—lightened by none of the sweet grace and pretty blandishments that we could not fail to admire, even when most kept in hand by our home-ruler.

Aunt Bee, after a while, suddenly called me to look out at the moonlight just rising over the lake.

‘We will stay here, my dear,’ she whispered, placing herself on the window-seat. ‘I’ve no notion of your doing Alice’s work for her. Besides, here come the gentlemen, and—I thought so—Clair St. Leger’s eyes are turning where they did during dinner. Don’t blush, child!—though, indeed, that little is very becoming.’

Next moment St. Leger was bending over me; and with a brusque movement my grand-aunt had left my side, observing, ‘Oh, are

you there, scapegrace? I can't stay to talk to you; Lord Pawlett and the curate both want to be brisked up and trotted out, so I must see after them.'

'Dear old soul! How nice of her to leave me her place!' murmured Clair, sinking into the deep embrasure of the window. Here we seemed quite apart from all the rest, looking out on an exquisite night-scene lit by heaven's candles; though close by sounded the uninteresting chatter of the ordinary world, which by mute consent neither of us seemed to heed in the least degree. 'And,' he went on, bending a little nearer as if to admire the rose in my hair,—'it was still nicer of somebody else to wear my flower. I could hardly keep my eyes off it all evening; it looks so charming just under that little ear.'

‘I wish you would not laugh at me, Mr. St. Leger. I am *not* accustomed to have compliments paid me,’ drawing away from him half-frightened, half-fascinated.

‘Don’t look at me with such an air of injured dignity, please, Miss Pleasance Brown. If nobody has never said to you more than that, why!—the world must be dull indeed, and without discrimination. Shall I say you are not nice; and that you have a very big ear?’

‘Please say nothing—’

‘Nothing!’ interrupting me softly. ‘Very well, I won’t. Only then you must talk to me with those speaking eyes, as you did to-day in the garden. How quiet and subdued you are to-night! Do look at me.’

By way of proving that I was not an utterly timid *ingénue*, I did look up, meaning

it to be for one moment—but for several more found my gaze arrested by his laughing caressing one. Just because there was that look of amusement mingled with his admiration, I did not feel half so discomposed with him as with almost any one else in his place. So we sat perfectly silent for some seconds. St. Leger seemed to have assumed that we had entered into a compact thereunto; for with one arm on the window-sill lazily supporting his head, with the other he toyed with my fan. Every now and then my eyes dropped; I would turn away from this confusing private lesson in magnetism. But he would arrest my attention again, with the look of a mischievous school-boy, by apparently threatening destruction to my beloved fan, which I dared not snatch from him, and which he mutely refused to restore. Suddenly

he protested under his breath, ‘What a nuisance! They are coming to rout us out of this dear little corner—we have not been happy here five minutes.’

We had not. But already my mother was bestirring herself, on behalf of the Miss Pawletts, to get up a round game.

‘You young people will all play, and we can look on,’ she smiled, ‘unless Lady Pawlett—what, oh, you would like to join too! Where is Mr. St. Leger? Ah, Pleasance, are *you* there? Mr. St. Leger, would you like better to play Van John than to sit still?’

‘I shall be delighted to play anything on earth you like, Mrs. Brown; including my own natural part of the fool,’ drawled Clair in evasive reply, with a quick regretful look at me. Still he rose with an air of such

outwardly easy willingness to leave my side, that inwardly I felt rather surprised. He was placed between the Pawletts by mother, who, in spite of some remonstrances aside from Beau, was bent on arranging the game. Secretly I agreed with Beau; thinking that unless every one feels like school-boys and girls, it is the dreariest thing on earth to set grown people down perforce to play for counters or sixpenny stakes at *vingt-et-un*; and my conscience had — then as now — scruples against playing for *much* money.

Meanwhile, our elders withdrew to comfortable arm-chairs; father and Lord Pawlett talking of turnips; mother resting, gracefully weary; and Aunt Bee actually producing fun in the curate. But our game languished as such amusements generally do. Alice and Sir Dudley banked, thereby keeping both their

conversation and their counters apart. Mild jokes, with which we had all begun, were changed gradually to covert yawns as time passed. Lady Pawlett, who was struggling to be lively with all the determination of over two-score years, kept endeavouring to attract St. Leger's attention from her daughter beside him to herself opposite, which the latter did not seem to altogether relish. In this delicate dilemma, Clair conducted himself with the most perfect impartiality between both claimants ; keeping up jokes with an even flow of great good-humour that rather mortified me ; for now he never looked my way. Still—my vain mind began to fancy there was no flash or sparkle on the surface of his mirth ; and so Beau, his friend, apparently thought too. For, as my mother came to bend over the chair of her eldest-born to ask with well-assumed

interest after the fortunes of the game, in her silvery complacent voice, he hastily muttered :

‘ It won’t do, mother. Look, St. Leger is bored to death ; you can’t set men like him down to this sort of thing nowadays ! *Why can’t you let us amuse ourselves in our own way ?* ’

My mother drew back rather aghast at this rebellion of her best-beloved against her long-established conviction that she knew best what we all really liked. But even at the same moment our grand-aunt, perceiving the state of affairs, and inspired by her whimsical love of movement, sat down to a piano in the oak saloon which opened out of the drawing-room by large doors, and began rattling out a frantic polka. We all flung down our cards ; and next moment, as if

bitten by a tarantula, were spinning over the polished floor in there, from which Bob had deftly whipped away the Turkey rugs in the twinkling of an eye.

Almost before I knew it, Clair St. Leger's arm was round my waist, and he had whirled me off in a most delightful dance. Both my brothers were doing their duty manfully with the Pawlett girls, who had quite roused into warmth. The affianced pair were revolving together as fast as Alice could make Sir Dudley heavily bestir himself. Lady Pawlett alone had been left out, to her momentary disgust; but then seizing gaily on my father she insisted on his dancing, and away he went with his coat-tails flying in a fine old-fashioned step, whilst my lady towered over his dear bald pate. How Aunt Bee played first a polka, then changed into a waltz, then

a mad galop, like one possest! And we danced on and on, not changing our partners, except Bob, who having the eldest Miss Pawlett to his sorry share, was pounced on presently by her Ladyship, who claimed him for herself. As for me, I was breathless with delight—and also because Clair St. Leger would hardly let me stop a moment, lest, as he whispered, we should be separated. Dancing had never before meant more to me than plunging into the Maelstrom of a crowded room, mostly with Alice's rejected and dejected admirers; but *this* was paradisiacal.

When at last all ceased in delighted exhaustion we two, at least, seemed to have acquired a tenfold acquaintance of each other;—why, we seemed old, old friends as we looked in each other's eyes!

‘And now it’s my turn,’ cried my grand-aunt springing up. ‘Come, Lord Pawlett, I’ll challenge you to a jig.’

Alice, with a scream of laughter, flew to the piano.

Lord Pawlett, fired by Bee’s example and father’s generous wines and attentions, began to shuffle his feet like a solemn beaver trying to be lively; with deprecating haw-haws against himself; whilst his witch-like old partner performed the most wonderful steps opposite him, cutting, crossing her feet in the air, with the most surprising agility, considering her age.

Bob, with his lopsided visage all on the grin, finding no one else to jig with, was jigging away by himself.

‘How eccentric your aunt is! What a blessing it must be that every one *knows* she

is a Beaumanoir,' acidly smiled Lady Pawlett, her good-humour being gone. Our saloon had been rather a *salle des pas perdus* to her; as none of the young men had paid her the special attention she still tried desperately for, save Beau; and having some maternal conscience, my lady had plainly meant him for one of her daughters in her own mind. Though, if that was impracticable, she was quite willing to flirt with him herself.

As we were all breaking up, my mother, who was beside me, murmured apart to Beau with a fond forgiving smile :

‘ Well, my dear, I am so glad you did enjoy yourself after all. Tell me, is not it odd that such a quiet person as Sir Dudley should have chosen Mr. St. Leger for his best man?’

‘Not at all,’ replied Beau carelessly. ‘Old Dudley has not really got any friends, you see, except utter old fogies like himself; so luckily he happened to know St. Leger, who is quite in ‘the swim’ on the other hand. I suspect Clair doesn’t mind doing it, because he is sure to be asked to Broadhams for the shooting, and some good dinners. He is always staying about somewhere or other.’

‘Ah! He is not well-off, is he? That is the worst of him.’

‘He has got about eight or nine hundred a year of his own, I believe,’ was Beau’s reply, disparagingly given. ‘Enough for a bachelor.’

‘Ah, yes.’

Then advancing with her charming smile, mother shook hands with St. Leger, in his

turn, as engagingly as if he had been heir to half a million, and we ladies trooped up the dark old stairs, making quite a pretty picture with our lights and coloured dresses against the sombre wood-work of walls and ceiling,—as Clair called out to us, looking up to me.

‘Pleasance, come into my room a moment,’ said my grand-aunt; as mother went on escorting Lady Pawlett to the glories of the blue and gold bed-room, that was all trimmed with old point-lace. And meanwhile Alice, prettily stifling a yawn, dutifully preceded her future nieces to their virgin chambers hung appropriately in white muslin. Aunt Bee had our second finest bed-room. Indeed, but for her odd habits, mother would no doubt have thought a Beaumanoir deserved the best. But, as the housekeeper

observed, it was 'heart-rending the way' Miss Beaumanoir flouted the splendidly-carved catafalque, wherein it was doubtfully related Charles II. had slept, declaring she would prefer any little iron cot, 'in which the only turn one could take would be the turn out.' Now she looked like a witch amongst the crimson silk glories of the room.

'Well?' she just asked; holding my hand with her lean withered one, that was, however, still vice-like in its firmness, while like the ancient mariner she transfixed me with her glittering eye.

'Well!' quoth I, guessing her malicious meaning, but resolved not to betray myself.

'Tiresome girl! So that's all my thanks for acting fairy godmother to you and your admirer to-night? Ah! you may well blush;

but I was right that you only wanted rousing to be almost a beauty. . . a tall divinity St. Leger called you to me ; some men like—positively like—dark-eyed pale faces like yours when the face is small and the eyes big ; and your pallor looks pure-bred. Queer tastes ! Now *I* always had little eyes and a big head, and never looked half so well-bred as a Brown minx like you ! Well, well, good night, Pleasance, child ; anyhow your old aunt tries to do the best she can for you.'

Dear old Bee ! truly she did so try ; and if only others had been as loyal, my story might have been a different one—whether for ultimate good or evil.

But in my own room once more, as I had dreamed in daylight, so I lay awake to dream ; and dreamt in sleep again only of

every word and sign and look of Clair St. Leger, hugging myself in foolish secret joy at the now double assurance that he admired me.

CHAPTER X.

WE bridesmaids were all kneeling in the little aisle of Stoke church—eight creamy-clad maids all a-row. For though too new still in the country to be very intimate with our exclusive neighbours' daughters, we had nevertheless by virtue of our riches managed to borrow four of their children.

As head bridesmaid I was nearest the bridal pair, and felt as if I could hardly take my eyes off them. How stout, burly, *stupid* Sir Dudley looked; and Alice—a smiling angel of loveliness in white satin. Some strange feeling suddenly so touched my heart,

the tears rising in my eyes, and a hysterical lump, like an egg, in my throat, that I could scarcely keep myself from screaming out, ‘Don’t take him, Alice; don’t! Say, *No, even at the altar-rails.*’ Good heavens! to have to live with Sir Dudley as closest companion one’s life long; to walk, sit, drive with him day after day. (In my innocence I never doubted but that Alice meant to do all this.) It seemed to me a thousandfold worse, too, now that *I knew* how delightful the society of some men could be. But Alice did know; she had seen the world. I had to bend my head till my spasm of horror and sorrowful regret was past. Did I not remember how, after all, only last night when I had gone into her room to say good-night—feeling really keenly that it was for the last time Alice was wholly ours—she had cried out

lightly, 'How ridiculously sentimental you look, Pleasance? Don't, for goodness' sake, devour me so uncomfortably with those great eyes of yours.'

But, in spite of all, I was still horribly afraid that Alice might break down. I knew that under an enforced calm, more than was natural, my mother was watching her nervously also. So with an effort, fearing to see a sudden gush of tears, I raised my eyes—The bride was laughing so much in her cobweb lace handkerchief that the little curate looked scandalized! But a dignified Dean and solemn Rector, supplied by the Digges' party in the alliance, were so smug and stolid perhaps they mistook her movement for sobbing. At that moment another pair of eyes met my pained ones. Clair St. Leger looked at me with such tender interest,

such a quick glance of pitying affection, that the warm blood swept my cheeks, and my heart beat fast whilst devoutly thankful that the curiously-watching crowd behind could not see my face. When it was all over, and we had filed out after the bride, St. Leger, helping me into a carriage, furtively touched my hand—a mere quick touch, but yet a sympathetic one that again made me feel agitated, although this time he was pretending to look away.

How quickly one learns this kind of deception! I, who had hitherto piqued myself on my honesty, trying indeed with a conceit on my name to make myself quoted as plain and pleasant, now found myself through that wedding morning pretending hardly to see Clair St. Leger beside me. Yet I was aware, with a sensitiveness almost painful, of his

every movement; feeling when he now and then turned to speak in my ear with caressing soft brevity, as if his breath wafted an atmosphere of love around me, while each syllable seemed full of musical intonation.

But I did not show what I had felt; no, certainly no one could have known! Already Clair seemed to have silently taught me to be careful. Then the breakfast was over;—to me the wedding seemed a mad mingling of prayers, champagne, laughter, and tears; the carriage stood ready. My mother, who was beside me, visibly trembled for the first time that I could remember, looking anxiously at her eldest daughter. Alice was buried in a great hug by father, and when she reappeared again to view there were tears—not hers—on her face. She stepped smilingly into the carriage, handed by Beau; putting

out her face past Sir Dudley to cry eagerly in a parting injunction to us all :

‘ Now, remember you are *not* to dance to-night ! If I thought you were all dancing without me, I would *come back* ! ’

Then came a shower of rice ; a volley of slippers ; a masculine growl from inside the brougham, followed by rippling girlish laughter—and the play was over. We were dull that afternoon. The neighbours had all left us : we had heard the last of the sincere and insincere congratulations ; and two silly old ladies who stayed to the very end had departed with the final observations that ‘ marriages are made in heaven—’ and that (smiling at Rose and me) ‘ one wedding always brings another.’ All gone but ourselves, and the house party.

‘ Shall we sit out of doors on the lawn, under

some tree?’ I asked rather dolefully of Amy, the second Pawlett girl, whom I liked best.

She answered, pressing my arm with a quite unexpected friendliness in her dull expression, ‘Certainly—’: she was sure I felt lonely; then, in a whisper, added might she just let her mother know.

‘Mamma; if you don’t want me at all, Pleasance has asked me to go out with her.’

‘*Mamma* this!—*Mamma* that!’—scoffed Lady Pawlett, mimicking her daughter’s humble tone with irritability, for the benefit of two or three married ladies of the Digges’ root and branch, the Dean’s and Rector’s wives who were staying in our house. ‘Why can you not ask me a simple question, without dragging in a “Mamma!” I wonder, my dear Mrs. Brown, that you allow your girls

to call you always mother ; as if they wanted people to think you a hundred.'

'Oh ! . . I rather like my children to call me so,' returned our mother in a very quiet voice ; whilst I alone could detect disapproval of Alice's influential sister-in-law under that graceful dignity of manner. Certainly, my mother was no older than Lady Pawlett, and had been far more of a beauty. Her light brown hair was as glossy as ever, her figure still slender, whilst the fair face never, marked by passions, sorrows, or even keen excitement, contrasted in beautiful restfulness with her ladyship's bold black eyes, and made-up complexion and person.

One could almost fancy, now, she might tell herself, behind those discreetly lowered, gentle eyelids, that she too might have flirted after marriage, snubbed her husband, and wasted

his substance in extravagant living—seeking for and trying to keep admiration till at last competing with her own daughters; but that she had, on the contrary, always felt penetrated with her duty as a Beaumanoir, a wife, and a mother.

We two went quietly outside, and I led the way to a shaded sequestered nook down a steep slope of the grass terraces. Here, thank goodness! Lady Pawlett with her loud laugh and restless ways would hardly find us, if even—as often happened—she grew weary of her compeers' society.

‘Where is your sister? Would she not have liked to come too?’ I asked, though feeling still awed by the eldest of my especial guests.

‘Oh, Charlotte, she is sleeping—at least, you know, she *says* she is taking a nap,’

replied Amy Pawlett, giving me an unusually confidential look.

‘But I don’t quite understand; why does she only say so?’

‘Because then she is supposed to be harmlessly employed, and *Mamma*’ (with sad bitterness) ‘does not torment her. She is really reading in her books of devotions.’

‘What, the Bible?’

‘Well no, not exactly. At least she does not quite tell me; and as I don’t go so far yet in my views of life as she does, I don’t ask. *She is preparing herself to leave the world whenever she can, I believe,*’—in a mysterious whisper.

‘Not to go into a convent!’ I cried in horror.

‘Either that or a sisterhood. I can’t see much difference between them myself, but

as it's wisest not to know what she means, I don't ask.'

'But to put on that ugly dress and live in a bare cell till you die!—to shut yourself voluntarily out from the beautiful world, and friends, and pleasures of every kind! Amy, it seems horrible to me!—like slow suicide.'

'Ugly dress, pleasures of society, friends,' slowly uttered Amy; who, sitting bolt upright as I lay stretched more classically on the grass, bent sideways, now to pluck nervously little bits of grass; adding in a low tone: 'Do you think really *our* lives are so pleasant that Charlotte need mind quitting all that? We are two plain, stupid girls with no fortune (yes, yes, we are!), and *Mamma* thinks our very existence a mistake and bother. You can see that for yourself.'

‘But still—’ I expostulated, and then not knowing quite what to say next, paused.

Then came into my mind with a ridiculous force the fragment of a cradle-song, to which our old nurse had many a time gaily dandled us each in turn on her knee. It ran—

‘I won’t be a nun,
And I sha’n’t be a nun,
And it’s nothing shall induce me for to ever be a nun!’

I felt such a stirring of life within me at the bare idea of convent cells, that I was quite sure nothing *would* induce me to ever be a nun.

‘It is not even as if your sister had suffered any great sorrows. One could understand it in people who have,’ I next exclaimed; thinking aloud.

‘How do you know?’ simply returned Amy, now pulling daisies to bits with still averted face. And there was an unmusical though

pitiful hoarseness in her slow voice. ‘One may be dull and plain, but still take likings; and then feel one’s life only full of pain and disgust. Mind, I only say, *one may*! Somehow I can’t give up hope altogether of my life changing to be at least a little pleasanter, some time. It’s foolish, I know, so Charlotte tells me. She’s stronger—but I’d rather be a housemaid than the holiest nun!’

‘It’s not foolish of you at all, I’m certain,’ hotly replied I. ‘We *ought* all to have hope; hope, faith, and charity—the Bible says so. Think too of Pandora’s box! Oh, surely—surely each human being must have some happiness of their very own in life, one time or other.’

‘Ah, I don’t know that. Not always worldly happiness,’ answered Amy Pawlett in a dreamy, heavy way, that a few days

since I should have called dreary and sluggish.

Now I sat abashed beside this poor plain creature, who knew more of the secrets of life than myself; and I could have cried for her, though she did not cry for herself. No doubt I must have been in a melting mood that day; but the wrench of parting from Alice and what seemed to me '*the pity of it!*' had moved all my being. Perhaps the wedding associations and the many thoughts of past and future thereby engendered had equally betrayed Amy into weak womanish confidence; and that to-morrow she might be as solidified as ever, and regret she had spoken unadvisedly with her lips. But I was glad to know she had a heart and brain like enough my own, though hidden inside that broad, graceless figure, with its dull-featured

face and lack-lustre hair. And, fancy those Pawlett girls with their suppressed heartache eating such hunches of cake after a mountain of lunch, as they did at five o'clock tea!

Verily, thought I, the life of each of us is a romance, to ourselves; and the dullest seeming might surprise the rest, if they could but write their own single story, as they each *felt it!* with pens dipped deep into their own hearts-blood.

‘Why are you two sitting so sadly on the ground?’ broke in a gay voice behind us. And Clair St. Leger appeared, guided to our haunts by Bob, who was shaking the branches ridiculously, in search of us; whilst Beau followed a pace or two behind with a scornful manner.

‘We both feel so quiet; after a storm

comes a calm, you know,' I explained, as they lay down beside us.

'Well; I feel as if we had all been in an atmosphere of champagne and orange-flowers, that has left a certain simmering excitement in the lightsome St. Leger not altogether disagreeable,' said the owner of that name.

'And I,' quoth Bob, with his wild eyes dancing, 'feel as much off my head as ever.'

'You may well say as ever; though you did distinguish yourself to-day, catching your coat-buttons in Lady Pawlett's lace, upsetting soup over poor old Bee's solitary lilac silk, and nearly putting out Dudley's eye with the heel of that last slipper you threw,' cynically murmured Beau, stroking his curved moustaches that just made a dark line

against his cheek, as delicate as his pencilled eyebrows. ‘For my part, I am not worth sixpence.’

Perceiving that my handsome brother was out-of-sorts—and as all the feminine portion of our family considered Beau in the light of a patronizing young house-god, to be propitiated even to the self-sacrifice of all the virgins, if displeased—I tried to conciliate him by observing in a sympathetic whisper:

‘I see you are low at losing Alice too, like me. It *does* seem such a pity! doesn’t it?’

‘Don’t be a romantic little fool, Pleasance,’ returned my brother, in a flash of indignant contempt that startled me. ‘Dudley is a very rich man—that is the principal thing; and a right good fellow, too. He and Alice could do a great deal, if they pleased, to help all of us; including yourself. You surely

don't imagine that their set in town will be like my poor mother's quiet fogies, who were fashionable only when she was young.' (Beau always said *my* mother with unconscious emphasis as if he had more property in her than we; a trick I have noticed in several maternal favourites. And he was the only one of us all who spoke of Sir Dudley with studious familiarity by name, without prefix.)

Seeing something was amiss with his friend, St. Leger, always good-tempered and willing to smooth matters for everybody, proposed we should all go for a walk.

'Not I, thank you, this hot day. Much better come and have a cigar in the shade of my den,' drawled Beau rising, with ill-concealed annoyance.

'Why, my dear old chap,' said Clair good-

humouredly, ‘I *have* been smoking for the last hour with you, so—’

So we started. Going along a narrow path through the thick shrubberies that stretched for almost a mile on every side round our house, and fringed the hanging woods, Bob suddenly pinched my arm as a brotherly secret signal. ‘Oh, don’t Bob, darling: my arms are all black and blue already, and it looks so bad at night,’ I expostulated in a whisper, dropping behind with him a moment. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m awfully sorry, old girl;—but I say what’s wrong, do you think, with his usually Serene Magnificence?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, I *think* I do. Do you remember his being equally genteelly savage about Christmas last, before he could make up his mind to tell

about the lot of money he owed ; though the dear old governor paid for him like a man ? ’

‘ Oh, Bob—how could he be in debt so soon again ? ’

‘ Whew ! don’t ask me,’ whistled Bob airily. ‘ Of course I’m called the wild one of the family, and the March hare ; still, I never understood how to make the money spin as royally as Beau does. I make a noise gambling for five shillings, and mother thinks me extravagant—she warns the pater ! whilst Beau loses a hundred sovereigns in the most graceful silence.’

At that moment Clair St. Leger looked back for me rather reproachfully. Clearly it had been no part of his intention, when proposing a walk, to pass his time with Amy Pawlett.

‘ Hullo ! what sheep’s-eyes that fellow does

make at you!’ muttered Bob, jeeringly, adding: ‘He’s like most of Beau’s friends—rather too fine for me.’

‘Don’t talk about what you don’t understand then, you dear old goose,’ I retorted, plucking up spirit, ‘but fly by the short cut to the schoolroom window, and bring out poor Rose. She must be so lonely, I know.’

I knew; because having often felt lonely myself in that same prim prison of a schoolroom in which we grubs had been rigidly pent till we came out as butterflies. My own coming-out had not been hastened by Alice; indeed even at her instance retarded by mother for a year or more, because I was still so thin and awkward-looking, as they both told me very kindly; and the glass had added this was then true. But Rose was neither shy nor wanting in colour and plump-

ness, so as I did not care at all to reign alone as Miss Brown, like Alice, it was my secret generous hope to hasten the emancipation of the family pet.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT a merry walk—or rather, race—we had! The wedding afternoon that had been so dull was now changed into one of the merriest, most deliciously golden-winged evenings imaginable—to me, at least!

With cheering halloos away went Bob, our leader, past our tiny Stoke hamlet; taking us all a merry scramble through copses where we startled the blackbirds; out across corners of broadly-hot fields; diving into cool woods again; plunging through fern-forests; scrambling up stony paths, and always surmounting innumerable fences.

And at all big fences, though I could jump like a bird, St. Leger sedulously begged of me not to risk a sprain, but to allow him to lift us down carefully. He did take exceeding great care certainly. Indeed, each time I found *myself* in his arms full two seconds longer than was strictly necessary; and felt relieved, with an inward flutter, that Bob was ahead—he was so severe in some ways, was Bob.

At last, when we had gone a mile of a chase through the country and were just re-entering Stoke woods again, after clambering over a last and easy enough stile, at which with real decision I rejected unnecessary help, St. Leger, who had nevertheless insisted on catching my hand, held it fast and quickly said: ‘Thank goodness! . . . The others are out of sight now; they are going straight

back, and won't wait. *Do* let us sit here a few minutes . . . ; you will talk to me just for a little, won't you—*Pleasance*?' It had come to that word from him once or twice already; no further. But this time my name from his lips frightened yet delighted me as with dangerous sweetness, for I fairly trembled. And yet, with the lightning speed of thought, I asked myself, why be so fearful, when Alice had been assured enough? Oh, mine, mine should be a very different marriage from hers! We two really, *surely* did love!—I trembled with happiness and dared not think more. 'Come!—sit down beside me,' murmured St. Leger, inviting me to share the topmost rail of the stile. It was a perch more airy than easy; but no matter!—

For some little time, neither of us spoke.

His arm was round my waist, and I, being at so young and blissful a stage of my life, be it remembered, felt all my mind lulled in a delicious strange day-dream of which Clair St. Leger's presence and embrace were the living fancies. The spot was a true lover's tryst too. They called it the Wishing-Stile in the country-side, for all the love-lorn maidens repaired here at sun-down to wish for their heart's desire; and every lover and lass in the parish had worn the cross-bar smooth before us. Behind stretched a gorse-sprinkled common, bordered by wood, to the sky-line. Were lovers surprised by any figure coming across it, they easily escaped unseen by gossips into the steep wood through which a little path led, overhung by brushwood; its track leaving an opening among the branches through which we now seemed to look down-

wards into the sunny glories of the opulent western sky. St. Leger's arm became tightened round me ; with a little murmur of dissent I ventured to beg release, yet alas ! not with a whole heart.

‘Then you must call me Clair. Let me hear you—Will you?’—he caressingly urged, bending his head nearer mine. ‘Come ! I must go away to-night ; and that dear voice has never yet called me by my name.’

‘Going away !—to-night !’ The ejaculations fell like snowflakes from my lips, as if my happiness had been frozen on them.

‘Ah ! you *are* sorry ?—Say you are— ! No ? Well, selfish wretch that I am, I hope—I believe you are, dear child. Did Beau not tell you ? He got a telegram asking us both up to shoot in Scotland, so he

wants me to start with him by the night-mail.'

'Ah!'—was all I murmured. But it seemed enough. For with a little flash of his eyes back into mine, and a tender exclamation, Clair caught me to him.

'*I* should have been so glad to have stayed!' he uttered passionately. And then before I knew our lips met in a kiss that seemed to me the first one ever given on earth.

A few seconds only, but not another word between us two, had passed, when there came the sound of an inquiring 'halloo' in the wood sent up after us. Clair made a gesture of impatience, and tried still to delay me.

'We *must* go now and join them,' I murmured, trembling with new-born love, but much troubled, too.

‘Then this is our last meeting, *darling*?’

‘I—I—suppose so,—Good-bye.’

He caught my hand. ‘No ; *au revoir*. I am asked back for your mother’s ball here in September. Till then, *don’t forget me*, . . . promise you won’t forget me, Pleasance . . . though I am such a miserable pauper.’

CHAPTER XII.

THE sun was down ; the moon rising slowly up ; the stars were beginning to twinkle forth overhead, and the world of nature to be hushed in sleep.

I had stolen out in the warm night-air ; past the pebbled court under the house-eaves, to where beside an ivied-corner of the furthest of our many cottage-gables, with its splashing little fountain sounding loudly in the twilight stillness, was niched a small hot-house. Stoke being built, or rather having grown, with such indescribable irregularity, it is hardly surprising that little gardens and glass-houses

were likewise dotted hither and thither about its bower-like precincts. It might have been imagined the woodland home of several big children, who had played at having each a rival half-acre of Paradise ; whilst their cottages seemed merely approaching each other for necessary protection, as the old Saxon *búrs* were once grouped round the central hall in the homestead.

Into this little glass-covered arbour I hied, looking eagerly round its blossomed walls. Not that I expected to meet any one !—No, *he* was with Beau, who for some inexplicable reason seemed moodier than ever, and hating his own company, gave it to his friend.

No ! we could not now meet again ; indeed I felt still too agitated with this bewildering love almost to wish it,—and all I was now seeking was a white rose-bud. Nothing

more ; but then Clair (how I loved just breathing the name low within myself !) had besought me, as we left the stile and were following the others within frequent ear-shot down the winding path, to give him some keep-sake—till we met again. ‘ What shall I give you ? ’ I whispered back, reddening, being indeed the veriest novice in love.

He smiled, glancing admiringly at my coils of brown hair ; just touching them with his finger in the soft mischievous way that made women allow St. Leger more such small liberties than other men, perhaps because he was so light-minded and playful that to take him to task seriously seemed to make too much of the matter ; or perhaps—simply because he had a certain charm ; privileging him to steal with laughing effrontery while others might not look over

the hedge. There are such people; and they have these inexplicable gifts we can all recognize, it may be with private envy,—but dare not copy.

But this time I had drawn back, slightly wounded and affronted. A lock of my hair! What right had he *yet* to ask so sacred a gift, as that should be, between lovers? Oh, of course, I trusted him, if with a vague and troubled sweetness of trust, yet most confidently. Had he not said, *au revoir*? and though now he could not well say more with Bob and Rose sending us jeering outeries through the bushes to know why we tarried, —*then, I knew what more he would say!* But as I drew back, shy and frightened, he said soothingly, ‘What is the matter? You are so sensitive, Pleasance . . . Well; will you give me another white rose-bud?’

So I was searching now for one, since by ill-luck all those of our former bush were dead; it seemed almost an ill-omen as I saw a few ghostly petals glimmering in the dusk. But here, up overhead in the greenhouse, was an exquisite bud, all I or he could wish. As I stretched up to it, my father's voice sounded through the open glass-door. His favourite stone seat was just outside, in a recess of the house-wall; so promising myself gladly a few minutes' pleasant chat with his dear old self—a pleasure stolen from his guests' rights, I still reached with difficulty for my bud. With more of a shock, came mother's voice in unexpected answer:

‘I have come out, my dear William. I slipped away from the other ladies, knowing you wanted me; as—as this is a matter—’

‘Of serious importance,’ said father with great gravity ; for she had seemed to hesitate, even be troubled in her speech.

My hand held the bud now ; but even as it broke under my fingers I stood rooted to the ground, while a great expectant thrill of shame, pleasure, fear, and hope tingled up to the roots of my hair. For—it must be confessed—I thought, *perhaps Clair has spoken to father about me ;* and unable to move, speak, or think, though innocent of eaves-dropping, I could not help standing motionless, and overhearing my parents.

Next instant, mother’s voice entreating gently sent a cruel shiver of disappointed counter-shock all through my being.

‘You *will* pay the poor boy’s debts, will you not, William ? He should not be so extravagant, I know ; but, after all, it is in

such a gentleman-like way ; and really it is so hereditary in him, I believe he cannot help it. All my family did the same, and he is such a thorough Beaumanoir.'

'Ada, Ada! is that all you can say in your son's defence? At least, he might remember, I think, that he is wasting plain William Brown's substance: all that his father earned with hard toil,' said my father very sadly.

I turned noiselessly to flee by the other glass-door, and hear no more of what was not meant for me; but it was locked. My mother's tones, a little sharpened beyond their usual low clearness by a sudden access of emotion, pierced my ears.

'Don't think I mean to depreciate your worth, my dear husbaud. Ah,—I only wish that in some ways Beaumanoir *was* more like

you.’ (This, of her idolized son, the image of her own ancestors! She could not have said more. I stood in despair, not knowing whether to show myself, to their annoyance, or stay still in the darkness and never reveal my unwilling presence.) Then mother added in beseeching feeling: ‘But still; say you will help him once again, for *my* sake if not for his. These losses in the business you told me of cannot be so very great; and I could not endure the feeling that my son did not pay his debts of honour.’

‘Dear; the business losses *are* severe, though I would not trouble you before by saying so, and trade is depressed. Then there has been Alice’s marriage portion now, and the London house; besides that, this place is expensive to keep up,’ returned father, more in deep grief than anger. ‘It comes to this,

that as I dare withdraw no more money from our firm, to pay this frightful, this exorbitant sum of Beau's, I should have to touch what I had laid by for the other girls' fortunes.'

There was a moment's silence.

'Father,' I cried, my whole soul in my voice as I darted out to his side, 'I am here! I was gathering flowers in there, and heard what you said without meaning to listen. Oh, yes; do take our fortunes,—at least take *mine*!—don't trouble your dear self about that,' and putting one arm round his neck, I kissed his head.

'You here, Pleasance!' ejaculated mother. Her vexation, I had foreseen, at being overheard was softened by quick satisfaction at my sympathy with her great heart's wish.

Still she added: 'I am glad you show such

a good feeling at once ; but you ought not to have listened, or have been out in the hot-houses so late. Now go, dear. You need not be so impetuous about this matter—as if your opinion or consent could influence your father.’

‘ Pardon me, my dear wife ; but this last is precisely where you must allow me to differ from you,’ said my father, in his slow, rather old-fashioned tone ; whenever gravity made his natural courteousness preponderate over jollity. ‘ In a matter like this, it almost seems to me, I would not dare to dispose of the future of Pleasance and Rose without their leave ; for money might make or mar their lives. In any case, it would be an inexpressible relief to know they will not hereafter blame their old father.’

Then putting his arm round my waist, he

drew me closer to him with great fondness ; saying : ‘ Come here, my tall daughter. So you really think you could face the world without fortune, do you ? Ah ! child, little you know yet. Well, well, well ; still, if God gives me leave, I hope to earn as much and more for you, darling. I am not an old man yet.’

‘ No, indeed ;’ thankfully murmured mother, who sat beside him. Then laying her white hand, flashing with diamonds through the dusk, gently on his—‘ And remember, dear, what the world thinks if such debts to friends are not paid ! It is sad and foolish in young men, I grant ; but still how many other sisters have to suffer likewise ! Your business habits and inclination to divide more equally between the children, and to think less of your eldest son than is generally the hereditary feeling

of other landed proprietors, makes you too rigid, dear William. Believe me, it does.'

There was a pause. All the time, my father had never taken his eyes off my mother's face with its pleading and still beautiful features. He smiled rather sadly ; against himself, as it were, for she had ever been the central object in life to him, and could move him as she wished—and, she knew it,—in almost all things. She added with a little sparkle of gaiety :

'Who knows? Pleasance and Rose may both marry rich men who will want no portion with them : in fact, I *count* upon it. No doubt Sir Dudley would not have expected any with Alice, had he but known.'

Father wagged his head with slow dolorous humour.

‘Don’t be too sure of that, my dear. Sir Dudley, like all rich men, knows money’s worth ; “nothing for nothing” is a very safe motto in this world.’

My heart at this moment began to feel suddenly heavy and heavier, the elasticity in my body to relax ; for in my generous heat and haste it had not struck me till now that *Clair was not a rich man !* My mother’s laughing prophecy brought it to my mind.

‘You are silent, pet,’ said father, laying his head against my shoulder ; trying despite himself to be sportive, for he could not bear money matters to weigh heavily on us. ‘Are you repenting of your offer ?’

‘No, father,’ said I stoutly, which was true ; then added—‘only I have nothing more to say. You know all about it.’

‘Quite true. And now you had better

really let her go indoors,' interposed mother ;
'for,' with a little sound of impatience, 'who
is there else to see after Lady Pawlett ?'

As my father slowly freed my waist from
his lingering clasp she added, moving nearer
him and assuming quite a bright, business-
like air :

'Then—I have been thinking this after-
noon, that my ponies could be sold ; for, now
Alice is gone, there is no one else to drive
them for me.'

At any other time, as I turned away, this
last proposal would have given me a little
stab in the heart ; for *I* had been looking
forward to driving mother, in my turn, in
that same pony-carriage with secretly quite
absurd elation. It was one of Alice's many
privileges, which fond hope had confidently
whispered would be part of my future

promotion ; as more my mother's companion and a being of consequence ; one of the small consolations to set-off against real sorrow at losing my sister.

Still—as I went indoors, holding my hand involuntarily over the precious bud hidden in the lace at my bosom, the ponies did not so greatly seem to matter. The glow of sacrifice had not yet died away to grey ashes within me !—only first ardour was cooling. And then I shivered, for the night air seemed chilly, as if some dampness had come up from the lake. I was troubled ; but far nearer and heavier than Beau's debts, pressed the thought that Clair St. Leger was going away before an hour. The other was a greater burden, but it might be laid aside for the present, at least ; it was on my brain even now, auguring unknown evils for the

future ; but this other smaller trouble lay close on my heart.

‘ Whither in haste, fair lady ? You come flitting out of the twilight eerily,’ said Clair’s voice.

In the deepened darkness, I had not seen three figures smoking in the porch, as I approached.

‘ Yes ; she comes like a ghost. Pleasance, you’re uncanny for the first time in your life. Let me turn you three times the wrong way of the sun,’ chimed in Bob, seizing me by the shoulders.

‘ Ought you to be neglecting your guests, by straying out alone in the gardens ?’ So said Beau ; carelessly knocking off his cigar-ash, and just looking at me with momentary criticising superiority from under his drooping eyelids.

‘I was with father and mother ; they were talking to me,’ I answered, with a flash in my eyes and a little rush of colour to my face, as I looked at him straight. In my heart I was fond and proud of Beau, and believed he really cared for me too after his fashion, but he seldom deigned to speak to me except to notice some defects in my person or behaviour ; and just now this lordly air of infallibility from him was irritating. He was silent a moment ; then said :

‘Are they out there now ? I will go and find them. St. Leger, the trap will be round in ten minutes :’ so left us.

‘What is this posy ?’ vulgarly demanded Bob ; snatching at my precious bud with the freedom of a favourite brother, and the gambolling manner of a big dog. But he

received a slap on his poor ear from my open hand.

‘Go away ; you shall not have it ; you are such a rude boy.’

‘May I have it ? I am really a very good boy,’ asked Clair behind, in his most mellifluous accents.

‘Perhaps . . . I have not quite made up my mind, yet,’—in shy withdrawal ; ‘not really coquetry, but a doubt whether, after all, I ought yet to give him a token so lightly, although this afternoon he had—’

‘By all that is highly proper !’ observed Bob, execrately at this instant, ‘we ought to be going indoors to wait dutifully on the lordly will of our new relations ; eh, Pleasance ?’

Sighing acquiescence, I followed the good lad. But as we were going through the

inner doors of the hall, I felt Clair gently possessing himself of my hand; a moment's pause, then he took the bud—he kept it;—that was all. A few minutes later, before my giddy head had got accustomed to the bright lights in our drawing-room, and whilst I was still forcing myself to offer agreeable little attentions and remarks to Lady Pawlett—who evidently thought it waste of time to answer, and was straining her eyes and ears waiting for Beau—there was a crash of wheels on the gravel outside.

Next came the little bustle of farewells. Our parents had entered with Beau, in whom I detected a suppressed air of relief; nay, almost intense thankfulness, I could fancy. He kissed me with light graciousness on my forehead, to my no small surprise (it was in thanks for what I had done for him). Then

they were off, the servants catching the last sound of their voices ; whilst I would have given so much to have been out there, and to have strained my eyes down the drive after them in the darkness.

Gone ! Yes ; Clair St. Leger was gone. But still, I felt so sure that when he came back in September, *he would ask me—— !*

In the days that followed, when the last wedding-guest had left us, we were somewhat dull. To be dispirited in fine summer days has always seemed to me double dreariness ; a shameful robbery of our due happiness of existence in the mere sunshine, which last is rare enough in Britain !

Bob had gone back to his army tutors to make gaily unwilling efforts to squeeze in

among the lowest candidates at the next examination. The ponies had silently vanished. And Rose, too, had made a smiling sacrifice to Beau's debts. (This is worth recounting, as showing my little sister's practical character, for which we already admired her in our family.)

One day, after a long private interview in mother's boudoir, the nature of which I vainly guessed at, she came tripping out in a transport of joy ; and giving me a quick, small kiss on either cheek, exclaimed : ' Listen what I've done, Pleasance, dear ; you'll be as delighted as myself. I'm not to have a governess any more ! '

Then, in answer to my astonished inquiries, Miss Rose explained, that—meditating over the reductions which were being effected as privately as possible by mother—she had

thought that her expensive governess might very well be parted with.

‘She would only have stayed six months more, at any rate, as mother promised to bring me out next season; so it saves that much; besides keeping the school-room maid to wait upon us both, and the separate meals, which must be a considerable expense—mother quite saw that,’ added Rose, wrinkling her firm little brow with the air of an old housekeeper. ‘Then, as I said, I can read two or three hours a day, French and German and *things* with you, Pleasance; because you are the cleverest of us all. Now, I know you’ll be as glad as myself to have me at liberty,’ executing some small hops with a most sprightly air, I could never have imitated.

Glad!—of course I was glad. With Rose

as my dear, little, daily companion, although I should certainly not reign in chief supremacy as Miss Brown, there was no longer any fear of being solitary. Perhaps I may have thought rather enviously a few moments that such a grace would never have been accorded *me* ; and that, on the contrary, for more than a year after the time when I might reasonably have been presented, my mother and elder sister had caused me (certainly under the kindest representations) to languish in school-room captivity. We all do have these sort of thoughts at times. It was wrong of me, but I was not at all perfect any more than most people ; still being really properly ashamed of myself, these ideas were soon stifled. For Rose was the youngest, and had always retained her privileges as my mother's last baby and pet, whilst we others received

justice and affection ; the latter seldom outweighing the former, except perhaps in Beau's case,—and then he was the eldest son.

So Rose soon had the school-room converted into a private morning-room for herself and me ; and surreptitiously bribed my maid (now hers also) to lengthen her dresses by a sly extra founce. When my mother remarked it, Rose kissed and coaxed her, with explanations that she did not wish to be considered ' out ' any the more ; but that short frocks made her feel awkward. Since the affair of Beau's debts our mother had grown somewhat silent, and unusually lenient or indifferent in small matters like this.

For myself, Rose's company cheered and kept me busy. Yet something was amiss. How golden those few days of Alice's wedding time had been !—but now I was always

vaguely troubled and sad. It seemed to me, though I was still so young, as if there had come—

‘——a mist and a driving rain,
And life is never the same again.’

Nay, nay! not a driving rain. I chid myself for such morbid fancy. A mist, perhaps—but who has not mists in their lives? And soon in September it would lighten and raise and brighten. For Alice had been promised her wedding-ball then, before Beau’s troubles were surmised; and then would not Clair come to us once more, and all the world seem full of music and sunshine and sweetness again. And who knew—who knew then what he might not say to me?

CHAPTER XIII.

SO September came at last, with its time of partridges and yellow stubble-fields ; orchards heavy-hanging with ruddy apples ; brambles glorious in all the hedgerows with blackberries and bronze-tinted trails. It was a time of year to me always beautiful but sad hitherto, with summer's death—never before so secretly longed for day and night.

Alice had come back to us. We had looked anxiously to see what change marriage might already have made in her, not saying to each other our fears of the dulling effect of Sir Dudley's companionship. She seemed

gayer than ever, however; or rather more excitedly determined to be gay, for Paris she declared had been too empty, and Switzerland too full for enjoyment.

‘ And now for my ball—who is asked to the house ? ’ she cried, throwing herself heart and soul into the matter; as if she was still the most interested one of us all therein. So, while Rose and I recounted the names of the expected guests, she expressed satisfaction, or pouted in criticism.

‘ What a dull set of men you have asked—all either mamma’s old beaux, or Bob’s raw chums; *or, at the best*, Beau’s friend Clair St. Leger—and you seem to admire him so much that no one else can get a word in with him, Pleasance,’ she ended very discontentedly. ‘ Why on earth did you not tell Beau to ask them all for you, as unfortunately

I was not here. His friends are nearly all of them afternoon-whist men; and not at all a marrying set; but still they would have *looked better* in the room.'

'We have not seen Beau for some time,—and father wished poor Bob for once in a way to ask who he liked,' I quietly answered, not entering into further explanations.

'And besides, Lady Digges, it is *Pleasance's* turn now, and mine, to play prime minister,' interposed Rose with a bright little nod.

'Pleasance has not been troubling mother for any favours yet' (no, indeed! knowing Clair was coming), 'but I mean to assert my rights soon.'

'You chit! I have no doubt you will,' laughed Alice good-humouredly enough.

'Well; wait till you both come to stay

with me at Broadhams in winter, and *then* you shall see what a country-house party I'll have !' Then turning to our grand-aunt, who was sitting beside us in the old school-room's privacy, but taking apparently no interest in the conversation : ' Anyhow, Bee, you will bring the duchess for me ? You promised us that ever so long ago.'

' Yes indeed : you extracted that, and a nice worry it has given me to keep my word,' retorted the old lady with a sudden flaring up of wrathful spirit, which showed her silence heretofore had been only dudgeon.

' A pretty price I have to pay truly for the freaks of you Browns. I wonder why I take any trouble about you.'

' But, Bee—dear Bee—you so often have the duchess staying with you alone for a night or two ; so we did not think it would

have been any more expense to you,' we all cried out together, aghast.

There followed in unanimous murmur—
'If it is only money, and that you are doing it for our pleasure, *do* allow father——'
(We all knew our old grand-aunt never had a spare sixpence; but at the same time her horror of receiving help from any of her nearest relations was quite a subject of delicate dread to them when longing to aid her.)

'Good gracious! do you think I wanted alms, foolish brats. No!—the price I pay is that of my pride, in bringing you a live duchess; for she instantly took a mean advantage, and declared she would only appear with me if I had a new dress. As if my dear old lilac silk that I've had since your mother's marriage was not good enough

for my friends, forsooth! However, as I cannot afford any such unnecessary garment, the upshot of the matter is, that to please both you and her, she has worried me into accepting a wonderful patent gown invented by a German tailor she patronises. So there—see what I’ve done for you!’ ended our grand-aunt, with a sound as of swallowed tears in her sharp short laugh. Then, interrupting our discreet murmurs of gratitude and satisfaction she added in a quaint grumble: ‘But, if you think from that, I’m more likely to allow presents from any of *you*, you are all vastly mistaken. No, no: what friends give one looks at as a token of affection; but from your kith and kin it has at once an air of necessitous support; and when I can’t fend for myself it will be time for me to go into my grave.’

‘But what kind of dress is this new one?’ inquired Alice, judiciously avoiding discussion on the subject of giving and taking.

Said Miss Beaumanoir with a sprightly air :

‘Oh, an excellent plan, and one that just suits me. It’s *reversible*, my dears. First it’s a heavy black silk by day, then at night, turn it inside out, and there you are!’

‘Yes, there you are ; but what are you like?’ I cried.

‘As fine as a jay ; crimson shot with gold,’ returned my grand-aunt composedly.

In a day or two Bee went back to her tumble-down old country-house, to begin her baking and boiling for the duchess, she said ; but before departure she confided to us in the privacy of the schoolroom that she meant to have more guests than the ducal lady only.

‘I’ve asked some old friends of your father’s, and his family; I’ve asked Mrs. Gladman and her son.’

‘The Gladmans—!’ uttered Alice, parting her lips and raising her pretty eyebrows in undisguised astonishment.

‘The Gladmans! We only ask them for small family parties,’ echoed Rose, pressing her mouth into a firm little button.

‘Exactly so. I always liked them, and thought they had been rather neglected lately at your wedding, Alice. Yes, they’re coming: I’ve just told your mother so, and she looked at me as if I was mad. But that is not all. I’ve another surprise for you in store—a young man is coming to me worth all the rest of your partners. What d’ye think of that?’

‘Well, if he is not better than that

good country booby, John Gladman, I pity the duchess,' said Alice, rather impertinently.

'He is of a great deal better family than your own husband; and let me tell you, the Gladmans, for the matter of that, are a fine old family, and far better than the Browns,' retorted the old lady in a flash of wrath. 'Pray allow me to decide who is fit to be asked to my house, and to meet my own friend.'

Afterwards I succeeded in soothing her; but in vain tried to extract the name of the mysterious stranger, as Alice and even my mother, in agony of apprehension at Bee's vagaries, begged me to do. 'For it is very odd that you seem quite her favourite, Pleasance,' said my sister.

But our grand-aunt shook her head and was not to be cajoled.

‘Trust me—’ she only said; ‘I never make a mistake about who are nice men; and this is just the sort of man I would like *you* to like, Pleasance,—worth three dozen of little St. Leger; though he does very well *pour passer le temps*.’

Was that all, Aunt Bee? However, I did not think it worth while almost to heed what she said, for in two days was not Clair St. Leger coming? Clair St. Leger!—most musical of names. I repeated it over and over, now and again, in my own mind; and so by keeping my fancy always occupied with the one image—the same person—fancying a hundred ways of where we should meet, and how he would look, and what he would say—I fell deeper and deeper into the

foolishly day-dreaming, unpractical state of girlish first love.

Then two days of nothingness, but that I felt waiting, waiting . . . had passed—

St. Leger had come with Beau.

CHAPTER XIV.

AND now it was night again.

In the solitude of my room that alone knew so much of my fond, mooning meditations of late upon my coming lover,—the dear old room where I sat idly looking out of the deep lattices on high, down to the lake, so many afternoons when they all thought me busy as usual, embroidering or reading or drawing—in this room I was once more ; but now almost weeping !

So it fares in love. Clair had come this evening, but only to be hurried up-stairs by Beau to dress for dinner. Then quite late,

after our solemn, smoothfaced, fat butler had announced dinner, he came in. One touch of my hand, hardly a look,—no more. He had sat beside Alice, after taking in Amy Pawlett to dinner—for Amy had been asked back to us at my earnest request, I had so pitied her—And he had devoted himself to my sister all the time, hardly noticing my poor dull friend. Rose and I sat together, and I feebly tried to answer her bright little remarks sometimes ; but my whole soul seemed occupied in trying to catch fragments of the talk opposite. It was all about Switzerland and Paris, where I had never been ; and about people in town whom I did not know.

In my heart I almost regretted my kindness in getting Amy to stay with us ; for otherwise *he* must have been with me, and surely he would, as of old, have preferred me to Alice.

Or, if mother had not asked that poor old neighbour of ours, who loved to call herself Mrs. General Jones—who was staring at Beau through her double eye-glasses, and talking volubly over her double chin—then Beau would have had Amy, whilst Clair and I——

No use thinking over all that now ! After dinner, being a small party, we sat in the morning-room, which was supposed to be more cosy than the drawing-room, but was cut in two by a great round table heavily laden with flowers, lamps, and albums, against which Alice had often protested in vain. On this occasion fate played Lady Digges a good turn. She was on one side of the table ; I on the other. What should Sir Dudley ponderously do, to my inner dismay, after dinner, but come in first, and heavily seat himself beside me on the very seat I had been secretly

guarding for St. Leger ! There was no more chance for me. When Clair came in, he gave one quick look certainly in my direction ; then Alice beckoned to him, smiling prettily behind her large feather fan. As he took the seat beside her with that winning and pleased look I knew so well, and had hoped was more for me than any one else, my heart sank, and I grew so dull and absent that even Sir Dudley must have wondered at me. Presently Clair took Alice's fan into his own possession, as he had used to do with mine. It hid his face so that I could only now see a wave or two of chestnut hair on the top of his head ; and yet I felt constrained to look again and again at him by some fascination, though as furtively as I well could.

Just before we went up-stairs for the night I might have easily moved a little and spoken

to him. But my feet seemed rooted to the ground; my tongue at the idea clove to the roof of my mouth; and after all our easy unshadowed friendship, the most horrible shyness came over me, as if he was an utter stranger.

Now—up-stairs, I miserably reproached myself for my cowardice, for had we spoken together, I should at least have known if he had changed. As it was, we had certainly touched hands when saying good-night in the family group—but I could not be sure Clair *had even looked at me!*

What with the disappointment I would have been glad to cry, but was too self-ashamed to do so. After all, I had nothing positive to complain of. It was only fate—yes, yes! that I reiterated to myself—only fate that had been against me; and how school

girlish it was to imagine that Mr. St. Leger would not talk agreeably to any one else, when obvious little difficulties had intervened to separate us. So trying to reason with myself, I lay heavily down, but not to sleep for long hours, and even then to dream only of vague trouble and disappointment. After such sweet anticipations, it was a sorry night, indeed.

Next morning with daylight, my courage returned marvellously. It seemed so weak of me overnight to have succumbed to the very first obstacles fortune had ever opposed to my intercourse with Clair St. Leger.

Of course, things could not always go as I exactly wished ; but one must be strong and bear that. The time seemed very long to my troubled heart, however, for the male half of our guests were all out shooting most of that

day ; and much as Alice tried, my mother's notions of propriety forbade our being allowed to lunch with them.

Once or twice, at breakfast and after, Clair might have said just a word or two to me aside, I fancied—but always some one or other came between us. No matter ; I was still resolute to make allowances, and be wise and patient.

By evening came my reward.

Passing through the inner hall, I met him at last coming in, hot, tired, but well-pleased apparently with his day's sport. ' Well, Miss Pleasance,' he exclaimed, with the old voice and smile ; coming slowly towards me, as if weary-footed but still determined on a talk, ' and what have you been about—you have hardly given me a word since I came ? '

‘That was not my fault, Mr. St. Leger,’ said I; trying to smile as lightly as if my heart had not been yesternight so heavy, and so bitter against him.

‘Meaning it was *my* fault, I suppose—! What an air of gracious haughtiness you say that with,’ murmured Clair, in half-soliloquy, looking full in my face, so that I was afraid my cheeks were growing warm in self-betrayal, and returned eagerly :

‘I did not say so. I never said such a thing.’

‘No; but some people’s looks are so eloquent . . . Come, forgive me this once, for it was really not my fault. Your sister called me over to talk to her; and she very kindly asked me to stay at Broadhams next month. *You* will be there, won’t you?’ His voice had suddenly become tender and

pleading, though he looked round as if especially careful not to be overheard.

What could I say? I tried to look down and say nothing beyond the vaguest assent; but my heart was softening, and he must have known as much, for he went on hurriedly:

‘Last night we were too small a party! Every word one said was overheard all round, and I hate that; but to-night you will have more people, so then— Anyhow, promise you will have four, no, five dances with me to-morrow night at the ball.’

Oh, silly, silly girlhood! That request made me so perfectly happy, that with beating pulses and a new warmth all through me, I slipped up-stairs to be glad a few minutes alone.

We were indeed a large party that evening; so large that Clair’s prophecy came untrue,

for somehow we always seemed separated—what with my duties as eldest daughter of the house, and his being such a universal favourite. But, nevertheless, this night I lay down almost happy again in anticipation; even glad of those few words we had had together.

It was very different, truly, from all I had dreamt through the dying summer. Yes! But the deadening disappointment of last night had shown me how foolish had been the exaltation of my former hope. Now, I was sadder and wiser, but still resolved to trust implicitly in Clair St. Leger.

CHAPTER XV.

‘ Last night, as to the trembling lute,
The dance gaed thro’ the crowded ha’.’

OUR ball had begun ; oh, what a delightful one it was !

To the first thrilling twang of the opening waltz, played by the best band all over west of England, Clair St. Leger and I had skimmed away over the polished floor of the ball-room that was like black ice this night. The guests were coming thick and fast, all in best dresses and highest spirits. For balls were then rare around us, and much to be enjoyed ; so every one came with a deter-

mination unto that same, which the hosts helping meant ‘go,’ that communicated like magnetism to the crowd. An old ball-goer would have known at once that the night would be a success. Bob’s friends had *indeed* come down to stay with us in force ! A body of strong shy youths, who blushed and laughed uneasily whenever one of our sex spoke to them, but watched ladies steadily with big eyes all the same. They one and all worshipped the March hare as their leader ; and after some awkward but ineffectual attempts to divert my attention from Clair St. Leger to their joint selves, chose Rose as their divinity and type of a ‘jolly girl,’ rather to my Bob’s chagrin, who could not understand why I did not get on better with his chums.

Too truly, as Alice had prophesied, mother’s contingent were indeed rather ancient Love-

laces, somewhat dyed and padded, and well aware what they were about. In consequence, they devoted themselves to a man to Lady Digges, the future ruler of the Broadhams' big house and winter-shooting ; who, for her part, merrily accepted their laboured devotion—*faute de mieux*.

And therefore—and therefore—not to my sorrow, I was somewhat less sought out to-night than either of my sisters.

We danced in the great dining-room, seldom used. It had been the old Saxon hall in long bygone days, so that no ceiling intervened between the dark oaken floor and the arched rafters of its lofty roof, that sprang in bold outlines above the fine later carvings panelling the wainscoted walls. Lofty, severe, and sombre in general though it was, to-night the old hall was flooded with light.

There were tapers, tapers, everywhere, in Milky Ways and constellations of brightness. There were stacks of hot-house flowers, and beds of roses filling every window-niche and carved nook. The old Bracy banners meanwhile, depending from the walls, frayed and time-worn, lent a more solemn beauty to the scene ; yet they were in keeping with the traditions of the hall, where they looked down on the festivity of this last human generation into whose ownership they had passed.

Without doubt Stoke was a gem—an ideal home this night. My heart swelled with just pride as I gazed round at what seemed dream-rooms of brilliance or shadowed delight—for was it not entirely to my dear father's credit that our ball was so beautiful? He had arranged it all himself, and no one had better taste.

The same thought was in St. Leger's mind too; for as we paused he exclaimed, with a little genuine outburst of admiring envy: 'What a charming old place yours is, certainly! Your father *is* a lucky man. Look at him now, receiving his guests, the perfect picture of an English country Squire, and then he is not troubled by having acres without the money, like so many Ah! any one can see that he has everything wealth can get, and, besides, all it so often does *not* know how to get. No lack of the golden showers here!'

It was on my lips to say something in half-protest against our supposed riches; as the remembrance of a summer night's scene in our garden came vaguely back to my memory. But I looked at my father standing up so straight and broad, for all his short stature—ruddy of face and silver of hair, without a trace of

trouble on his dear broad brow—and then all shadow of possible coming care died away within me.

This night was too happy a one! I was with Clair, and would be with him again and again; and all through my being was a vague delicious dreaminess of satisfaction in which thought happily died.

My mother stood queen-like at the door, shimmering in diamonds and satin gloss, and robed in costly lace. Every now and then I could detect father stealing a glance at her—and then round at some of us—with such fond, though partly-concealed, pride and affection. Clair saw it too; perhaps his eyes were guided by sympathy.

‘Yes,’ he murmured. ‘Few men have such a charming wife at her age, two such good fellows for sons, and such perfect daughters.’

Or' (lowering his voice), 'to say what I think —*such* a perfect daughter!'

It was the old tone ; the old look ! I called them old, and yet they had been but those of a few happy hours last summer. Feeling utterly blessed, but unnerved, I looked down, trying to hide my happy smile and the blush that was self-felt, I trusted, rather than shown, while my heart quickened its beats.

At this moment, as the first waltz ended, a sort of thrill seemed to stir the crowd near us at the doorway. A line of footmen's heads, culminating in the naturally-frosted pate of our sleek chief butler, could be seen in a file down the outer hall to the entrance-door. And though mother never stirred a hair's-breadth from her due post, yet by the forward bending of the bodies of the meaner folk around, making a wave-like movement

on either side of a Red Sea passage the crowd reverentially left, I knew the Duchess—the glory of our countryside—was coming.

‘The Duchess of Westerton, and Miss Beaumanoir!’ was indeed sonorously announced immediately; some meaner sound then followed as of the Gladman name, soon lost in the ducal reverberations.

‘Whew! the duchess, *and* the Queen of Sheba!’ exclaimed Clair, transfixed, while he and I gazing from afar beheld a sight advancing that outdid speech.

‘Oh! glory, hallelujah!’ whispered Bob, as springing across the room he came to pinch my arm fraternally in the most delicate portion of its softness, that I might partake of his secret joy. ‘Come nearer, Pleasance, my child, come nearer; I would not miss this sight for a thousand pounds.’

In the twinkling of an eye, likewise, we found Alice by our side; her eyes as big as saucers, and her mouth quivering with laughter. Rose, too—peering with bright determination over unkind shoulders that were taller than her eyes, unless she stood on tiptoe. We were all there to do Bee honour, excepting Beau, who, as Bob disgustedly murmured, with a backward glance of his eye, was doing ‘the grand’ in an attitude of elegant expectancy in the middle of the hall.

The duchess advanced, a ponderous figure in dark-blue velvet, smiling around with the affable condescension of her conscious rank, and the good-humoured unction of all stout people. But she was almost blotted out of our visions next moment by the weird little figure behind her in a blazingly gorgeous

red dress of dresses ! It seemed to swallow its small wearer in folds of flaming splendour, and trailed behind in yards of wastefulness. So old Miss Beaumanoir clearly thought, for already she was giving the tail thereof some spiteful kicks ; and with her shoulders hunched up, and her black eyes searching the crowd with a sort of angry defiance, our grand-aunt looked really, rather like a witch at the stake.

Then two, large, motherly hands caught one of mine, and a kind voice that I had not heard for nearly three years whispered in my ear :

‘Pleasance, my dear child, how lovely you look ! I had no idea you had changed so from my pale, little, school-girl friend.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Gladman,’ I murmured back,

meeting with deprecating pleasure the kind glance of my good godmother. ‘No one else thinks so, I am sure ; at least, hardly any one else.’

‘Perhaps not every one ; it might be a matter of divided opinion ; but *I* think so, at least.’

‘I am so glad to see you again ; it seems such a long while since——’ (Thereupon, an uncomfortable pause might have suggested that it was our fault as a family we had not seen Mrs. Gladman of late.)

But that most forgiving of dear women comfortably answered :

‘Well ; it is some time, dear ! But once Alice came out, that was quite natural ; for your mother has had to begin a gayer, more fashionable life, and you had to be strictly finished in the schoolroom—while I

have been leading my usual existence of a country vegetable.'

It gave me real pleasure to see that, although she so miscalled herself, hardly one of our company, not excepting the duchess, had a better air or presence than Mrs. Gladman herself. Dressed very handsomely, though quietly, she still enjoyed a large fair comeliness. It gave a charm as of surprise at seeing such beauty of health.

'But where is John? I want you to dance with him, dear; if only to give my eyes the pleasure of seeing you both together,' she went on, looking round.

She had only a very little way to look. Standing bashfully behind some strangers—among whom he had allowed himself to be entangled, having drifted from his party—was a well-fed looking and handsome, countrified

young man, steadily gazing at both me and his mother through round black orbs.

Mrs. Gladman started at once to recover her son from his captivity among the stranger skirts he seemed afraid to tread on. Meanwhile I found Alice energetically stabbing me in the side with her fan (a little attention she would have loudly protested against, had I ever dreamt of returning it).

‘Who *is* that other man Bee has brought with her? He is the only man in the room I am dying to dance with; such a good air, and so fine-looking. She is bringing him up to *you*, the little wretch! Pleasance, like an angel, pass him on to me.’

On the other side of me, Bob had also suddenly begun renewing his friendly pressures of my elbow, this time so excitedly that I winced, feeling convinced that all secret

pride in the whiteness of my arms would be ruined for the evening.

‘Pleasance, I say!—don’t you remember? Doesn’t something remind you of—?’

But I could neither attend to him nor Alice, for at that moment my grand-aunt advanced upon me, and snatching at my hand as if her fingers were talons, exclaimed—energetically holding her prey at half an arm’s length—and turning towards a tall, fine-looking man behind her:

‘Here she is, Fulke. Here, Pleasance, is a partner for you. Many a time I have nursed him on my knee in this very house; where he had then a better right to be than even you have now.’

The new-comer said, in a deep pleasant voice which somehow seemed not quite unfamiliar, bringing some vague memories as of

a pleasant dream : ‘ This is not quite the first time that I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Pleasance Brown ; though ’—looking at me with a kindly smile lighting up good grey eyes—‘ I daresay, you have quite forgotten me and Dartmoor, as I should hardly have recognized you in the change of finding a grown-up young lady.’

I stammered over an answer, puzzling my memory tantalizingly but vainly, when Bob, who had been craning his long head and neck forward to examine the stranger inquisitively, suddenly thrust a yard’s length of arm and hand between us, exclaiming with a cry of joy :

‘ I knew it—I thought I knew you from the very first. Shake hands. How are you,—how are you? Why, Pleasance, don’t you remember Mr. Fulke?’

‘Mr. Fulke!—of Chagford?’ I repeated, in a maze.

‘I don’t know what you and Bob mean with your Mr. Fulke,’ interposed our grand-aunt brusquely, as if she thought us both crazy creatures. ‘But, anyhow, his proper name is Mr. Fulke Bracy, the last of the Bracys of this very house of Stoke-Bracy.’



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